Just once, Jass looked at Queen, and that once was almost enough, for she saw the unbearable grief in his eyes, and a pain, and a loneliness, more intense than her own. She allowed Sally to pull her away, and left her father alone with her mother.

He didn't look at her, and he didn't go to her, because there was no point.

She was not there.

He sat in his old rocking chair, and stared at nothing. Waiting. If he did what he had always done, sat and waited for her, then she would come back from the well, and sit at her loom, and they'd be together again, nothing could keep them apart, and everything would be as it had always been.

He sat for hours, seeing her dance in his mind, a living and beautiful thing, who had taken possession of his heart at some time before he could remember, and had nursed and cherished him through all his life.

He didn't move or speak. Night came, and still he sat there. Then, without understanding how it happened, he knew she wasn't going to come back from the well, ever again. He knew he would never see her, living, again, and prayed that her soul was in some sweet and gentle resting place.

For a great and simple truth had overwhelmed him. He had known it for so long, all his thinking life; perhaps he had put it out of his mind because it made the world too complicated. The implications of it now were so frightening, he could not, at this moment, bear to consider them.

Black people did have souls.

He turned and looked at the body.

"Oh, my love," he said.

And he wept.

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it was as if someone had turned out a lamp in Queen's heart, or God had snatched the sun away. Although the awful truth of Easter's death had burst into her soul at the moment of her mammy's going, Queen understood that it was to a place she could not follow, and disbelief fought with knowledge. A tiny part of her nursed, cherished, the idea that her mammy was only resting somewhere, and would come to her again, but the greater part knew Easter's loving embrace was gone forever, and she was filled with an unassuageable sense of loss. Anger battled with despair, and loneliness was the champion.

Under Sally's careful instruction, she had gone about the necessary business, and had sat outside the weaving house for hours waiting till Jass had finished whatever it was he still had to do with her mother, clutching the winding sheet to her, and keening softly. When Jass left the weaving house late that night, Queen went in, and kissed and caressed her dead mother, and wept her distress. Then, refusing Cap'n Jack or Sally's help, she had washed Easter's body, gently as a daughter should, and made her hair pretty, and wrapped her in the winding sheet.

As she tended the body, unanswerable questions assailed her, of which the greatest concerned Jass, for now he was her nearest living relative, apart from Cap'n Jack, and the living link of love with her mother. For she knew it must have been love, and knew it was a love that fell outside the parameters of conventional domesticity. As a slave, it was not strange to her that Easter so willingly accepted the limits that their society imposed on their relationship, and to have had the small proofs she did of the Massa's love was a treasure sweeter to Queen than any she could imagine. It was what she wanted now, some word, some look, and, most wondrous of all, an

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embrace, from her father, but it never came. Apart from that one, tiny, anguished look that Jass had given Queen, when she had thought she had seen into his soul, Jass ignored her, and this added to Queen's sense of bereavement. She had thought that he loved her, but now, in her time of greatest need, his reassurance did not come. Cap'n Jack was kind to her, and Sally, but they could not fill the void in her heart. On the night that Easter was buried, Queen could not sleep. Comfortable and warm in her tiny cot, she could not bear to think of Easter lying in the wet, cold earth, eaten by worms. It was Sally who was able to persuade her that the ground would be kind to her mother, and cherish her mortal remains while her spirit found a greater comfort.

Jass was not thoughtless of Queen, nor did he intend to hurt. It was simply that he was trying to find a way to cope with his own grief, his own loneliness, and to avoid considerations of his world turned upside.

He longed to fight for his country, but he no longer believed in the cause his country fought for. Jass now believed that slavery must end one day, for the forces of the world and his own heart were against it, but he could not let his country be vanquished by his brothers. Queen was the physical embodiment of the contradictions that raged within him. Restless and dispirited, he spent most of his days in Florence, anxious for news of the war, and getting drunk with men who were too old to fight, and boys who were too young. He was bitter because he had been forced back into idleness, while good men, friends, were dying.

Neither side appeared to be winning, and the list of the dead was growing daily. Almost everyone who came to The Forks had a friend or cousin or brother or son who had paid the ultimate sacrifice.

It was winter. Barren, inanimate winter. The trees were lifeless and bare.

The slave graveyard, so prettily situated in the other seasons, was desolate now.

The slave graveyard, so prettily situated in the other seasons, was desolate now. It suited Queen's mood, for the weeks had not eased her sense of loss. A simple wooden cross marked Easter's grave, among so many dead. Next to her lay Julie, who had gone so very recently, and Ephraim who had also died of the fever. Not far away was Solomon, who had

escaped from The Forks of Cypress once, and been recaptured and brought back, and never ceased to bore them with the tall tales of his freedom. Over yonder was Tiara, who had helped Queen to be born, and had been kind to her when she was little. She was gone soon after Queen moved into the big house, and lay beside her husband, Micah, in perfect peace.

Queen came here almost every day, to tend the grave and keep it neat and clean. And to talk to her mammy, who was, to her, still a living creature, safe, in God's comforting arms. Jass's return had not made everything all right again; if anything, their physical circumstances were worse. The war, which everyone had thought would be over in a few short months, dragged on.

Food was scarce; all they had was what the farm could provide. It would soon be Christmas, but no one could find any reason for cheer.

Queen, wrapped in a blanket to keep her warm, sat by her mother's grave and told her these things. She was cold and lonely, she worked too hard, and no one ever seemed grateful for all the things she did; they accepted them as if it were her place to care for them, and demanded as much from her as she could give, and then demanded more. To them she was a slave, she knew, and it was her duty to slave for them, but Queen could not accept that she was only a slave. No one understood that Queen looked after them all because they were her family.

If only she weren't so tired all the time. If only her mammy were here, with her, to help.

"I miss you, Mammy," she whispered, too exhausted even to cry.

She sat for a while and pulled a few old weeds from the grave. Not many, because it was winter, and not even weeds grew in winter.

She became aware that she was not alone. Someone else was standing in the trees near her, watching her.

It was Jass. 4

Wearily, Queen dragged herself to her feet.

“I sorry, Massa,” she said, knowing her place.

He shrugged his shoulders. Place didn’t matter very much, here. Neither of them said anything because they couldn’t think of anything to say. Gossip was irrelevant, sacrilegious here, and all the news was bad.

But the silence was awkward. More than Massa and slave, they were not as much as father and daughter. Yet he had to speak to her. If her loss was as keen as his own, could they not find some little comfort from each other?

“Do you come here often?” Jass asked, and Queen nodded.

“You work very hard,” Jass said. “Thank you.”

Queen closed her eyes, and felt warm again. At least the Massa understood how hard she worked. At least her father had said thank you.

“I’m sorry we’re not more help to you,” Jass said, and it was Queen’s turn to shrug.

“Not your place, Massa,” she told him. She did not understand his mood.

He was here with them, safe from the war.

“Sometimes I wonder where my place is,” he said, and his bitterness confused her.

Why did he hate himself so? Queen wanted to go to him, hold him, tell him

they loved him. Tell him that she loved him. She didn’t, because she didn’t know how. No one had ever taught her. She wondered if her mammy had ever told him how much she had loved him. Or he her.

She turned away, unable to cope with his bleak, winter mood, but her need for him was too strong. She turned back, but he was gone.

Jass walked down the hill from the slave graveyard. He had wanted to be there alone, to sit and talk with Easter for a while, but Queen was there, and he felt guilty at disturbing her. The child had so little; he could not take away what little she had. He had found no comfort from her; rather her evident sense of pain had increased his own. Thoughts of death and dying filled him. The family cemetery was at the bottom of the hill, and he went to it, and stood at the graves of his daughters. Cap’n Jack had said they died easy, but that wasn’t true. No one died easy.

He yearned to be away at the war. He wasn’t sure what the cause was anymore, except the protection of his place and his family, and they had to be protected. He tried to block his mind to the matter of slavery, because to deny the rightness of it was to deny the South, and everything Jass understood himself to be. What was important was the South, not for the

maintenance of slavery but for its sheer survival. Militarily, the South seemed to have a small advantage; at any rate, they had not lost. Perhaps the North had originally underestimated the skill and ferociousness of their enemy. Perhaps they had misunderstood the whole rationale of the war. The South was fighting for its very existence; the North was fighting only to win. But the North had the resources to assemble a vast war machine, Jass knew, and when that was in place the possibility of a Southern victory required every possible man.

One of those men was Jass. Discharged from the army but determined to fight, he had talked with his brother William, who had presented a solution. William, a

Confederate state senator, knew all the ins and outs of political intrigue. He intended to raise a company, the Franklin Rifles, and would pay for their uniforms. He would present his company to the army command; it would be accepted into service and William given a commission considered appropriate.

There was no reason why Jass could not do the same. He could afford to do so, and the army would infinitely prefer to have his troops under its command than roaming renegade free.

He told them at dinner, and Lizzie was predictably angry. As usual, Parson Dick was listening in the pantry, and relayed the news to Queen in the kitchen.

“Miss Lizzie don’t like it,” he said.

“Miss Lizzie don’t like nothing,” Queen sniffed, busy with the meal. “Set them taters out for me, Poppy,” she called to her unwilling assistant.

“And you get that meat out to them, Parson Dick, you hear?”

“Not much point. Nobody’s eatin’, ‘cept young Massa William.” Parson Dick was enjoying the row in the dining room.

Queen didn’t want her father to go, and was as angry as Lizzie. She banged a pot on the stove. “Ain’t none of our business,” she snapped. “We cook it an’ serve it. lf’n they eat it or not’s up to them. “

Parson Dick took the stewed rabbit into the dining room. When he was gone, Queen’s energy deserted her. Why did he have to go? He was wounded, he had no reason to fight. Why did he want to leave them alone again, when they needed him here?

Lizzie tried so hard to be reasonable, but could not see Jass’s point.

He couldn’t protect them if he was hundreds of miles away.

“What if the Yankees come?” she said for the umpteenth time. “A handful of raggedy slaves can’t protect us.”

Parson Dick bridled at the word “raggedy” but presented the rabbit to Sally.

“They’ll never get this far South,” Jass insisted.

“They might,” Lizzie countered.

“Then it’s up to me to try to stop them!” Jass was angry, and Lizzie and Sally both knew it was pointless trying to change his mind when he was this determined.

There was a small silence while Jass fumed and Lizzie sulked. Sally tried to restore order.

“Well, now, rabbit,” she said. “We haven’t had meat for a while.”

“A scraggy ol’ thing Massa William shot this morning,” Parson Dick told her, and winked at William, who, alone of those at the table, was pleased that his father was going back to war. The fathers of most of his school friends had gone, and even though William understood that Jass had been wounded, he wanted a soldier father, especially an officer. He hadn’t understood why Jass enlisted as a private the first time.

Jass assembled and paid for his company, the 27th Alabama Infantry, offered it to the Confederate Army High Command, and was appointed lieutenant-colonel. They marched out in January to Fort Donelson, where they were assigned.

Sally was pleased. Fort Donelson was named after the family of her dear departed friend, Rachel Jackson, Andrew’s wife, and was situated on the banks of the Cumberland River, near Nashville. Jass would be safe there, hundreds of miles from the Northern battlefields.

She was wrong.

A vast, unstoppable, blue-clad army appeared, it seemed from nowhere, from the west, conquering all in its path. Fort Donelson fell to the forces of General

Grant, and Nashville soon after. Jass was taken prisoner of war.

“Perhaps it is God’s will that I do not fight,” he told his

mother in a rare letter during his incarceration. “At least, He seems to be doing His level best to keep me from this war.”

He prayed for a similar blessing for his family and cursed it for himself.

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Young Davy brought them the news first. For days they had expected it, but when it came it was shocking.

“The Yankees done took Florence,” he yelled as he ran up the hill. -01’

Linkun’s in there killin’ everybody!”

He’d taken the buckets down to the cesspit that morning, wide-eyed with fear, because the rumors said there were Yankees everywhere, and while they were supposed to be friendly to black people, Davy wasn’t so sure. He’d heard Miss Lizzie talking about them the other day, and the terrible things they did to women and babies, and if they were that mean, obviously you couldn’t trust them. He emptied the buckets and was about to go back when he heard a horse galloping toward him. There weren’t any trees or bushes nearby, and he surely wasn’t going to jump into the muck-filled pit, so he stood his ground, and was filled with relief to see that the man riding toward him wasn’t a soldier.

The man didn’t stop. “Run tell your Massa, boy,” he cried, galloping past Davy. “The Yankees have taken Florence!”

Davy needed no second bidding, but ran for all he was worth, Miss Lizzie’s

stories of the misdeeds of Yankees pounding through his brain.

The few slaves in the field, tilling the soil in readiness for the new planting, stopped work and tried to assimilate what they heard. If the Yankees really had taken Florence, it wouldn't be long before they got here. It was coming, it was coming, hallelujah, it was coming. Freedom was at hand. They laughed among themselves, but instead of taking the day off,

or the rest of their lives, they went back to work with renewed vigor, and took up a joyous song.

Sally, organizing the beating of rugs with Poppy, heard the song and was pleased. An odd thing had happened over the past few months. She had always believed that the plantation was an island unto itself, and all who lived there, white and black, were interdependent on each other. In a sense it was true. Miles from their nearest neighbors, the travails of their daily lives, the births and deaths, arguments and marriages, parties for the whites, beatings for the blacks, were the basis of their conversation, with occasional snatches of misunderstood gossip about the outside world reaching them through visitors or the grapevine. The wellbeing of the plantation was critical to all of them, because if it was a good harvest they all ate well, and, for the slaves, their Massas might be in better tempers, and if it was a bad harvest, everyone suffered. Yet one group had privilege and the other did not, and if Sally thought of it as a community, the slaves regarded it as a prison. They made the best of that prison, and while a few, especially among the house slaves, had considerable affection for some of the whites, there was always a barrier.

In the last few months, that barrier had, to a considerable degree, been removed. With no Massa and fewer slaves, they had all got to know each other better. Now everyone was dedicated to the common cause of immediate survival. If there was food, everyone ate; if there was none, no one ate.

If jobs had to be done, they all pitched in to do them. They maintained the charade that things were as they had been because that was the ordered world

they all understood, and in these frightening times, order was all they had to cling to. Isaac, solid, reliable Isaac, had been put in charge of discipline, and even given, to Lizzie's howls of protest, a gun. He used it to shoot rabbits, because very few of the slaves left wanted to run away. There was nowhere to go. Jeremiah and two other runaway field hands had been recaptured and returned, bloodily beaten, and while they still talked of escape, they did nothing about it. The runaways told awful stories of the outside world-they'd lived in the woods bordering small farms, they'd eaten nothing but turnips and potatoes for days, and

when one of them ventured to a house to beg, he'd been shot at. They all understood that if they could get away, and get to Union lines, they would be free, or hoped so, but no one was very sure where the Union lines were.

So they preferred to wait, and see what the war would bring. They had no Massa and no overseer, except Isaac, so life was tolerable, and they ate regularly. Happily, the barns at The Forks were still relatively full, and the first spring vegetables ready for picking.

The most obvious evidence of this new communality to Sally was that she now knew the names of all the slaves. Such as the boy Davy, who was running toward her, yelling at the top of his lungs. She'd been expecting his news for days; everyone in Florence had been prepared for an invasion. There was no army nearby to protect them, only some local militia units, and Sally, like everyone else, had been living in dread.

But she put her faith in her fellowman, and gave no credence to Lizzie's lurid imaginings.

They were here, at last. It would not be long before they came to The Forks, Sally was sure, because she could guess what they needed.

And two days later they came.

"They look so fearsome," Lizzie said. "Brutal."

They look so fearsome," Lizzie said. "Brutal.

"Pull yourself together, 11 Sally urged. "They're only men.

Lizzie corrected her with a fierce, defiant whisper. "They're Yankees!

"

But she stood beside her motherin-law and tried to maintain her composure as a small troop of Union soldiers made their way up the drive.

They were a foraging detail, requisitioning food. Once the first shock of occupation had settled down, Tom Kirkman had come out to The Forks, to assure them that the soldiers were reasonably well-behaved and looking for provisions. He'd volunteered to stay, to protect them, but Sally had laughed.

"You against so many, Tom? You said we had nothing to be afraid of. Go home to your family."

Tom had gone, and the following morning Davy, who had been stationed near the road to town as lookout, gave the news of the arriving Yankees.

The captain, on horseback, led his men up the drive. He was impressed by the grace and elegance of the house, which was as fine as any he'd seen, and he looked with pity at the bunch of ragged slaves cowering near the trees. These were the backs that made the fortunes that built the mansions such as this.

He stopped his horse on the lawn in front of the veranda and looked at the small group assembled there. An old woman, and a frightened, defiant younger one. A couple of children, and some few house slaves.

And a beautiful young white woman, dressed as a servant. Mulatta, probably, but hard to tell. The sergeant called the men to a halt.

"Ma'am," the captain said to the old woman, and touched his cap, out of

respect for her sex and her age, not her station.

Sally squinted and wished she could see his insignia of rank better.

“Good morning, Lieutenant,” she said, and he did not correct her demotion of him. “We are, as you see, a depleted family. There are no men here.”

She did not see his eyes stray to the male slaves, but corrected herself anyway.

“Apart from these few slaves. I trust you mean us no harm?”

They were all the same, these tough Southern matriarchs, he thought, the backbone of the whole society.

“We mean no harm to anyone who is loyal to the United States,” he said, by rote. He’d done it a thousand times before.

“I cannot swear allegiance to your flag, sir,” Sally responded as he knew she would, as they all did. “I believe in a different cause.”

“Believe in whatever cause you like,” he told her. “As long as you do not intend to fight. I do not think that you would win.”

He looked at the slaves and women, and then at his own rough-and-ready soldiers, his point well made. Sally was surprised at his civility.

The captain was a very civil man, and loved his country. Second of three brothers who had enlisted in the army, he was a college graduate, and a teacher at a good school until the war came, this wretched. Rebel, war.

He went through the details, formally, officially, as he always did. He told of the food they needed, and of the chits they would be given in return for that food. He told them of the cottonseed that he intended to seize.

“That is our only source of income!” Sally cried, and the captain smiled, for

that was why he was taking it.

Business done, he accepted her offer of refreshment, and listened to her protests about the cottonseed.

“You will not hann us, but you will bankrupt us?” Sally reasoned.

“Orders, ma’am,” the captain said, although it was not true. It was his own idea, born of his own bitterness. If it had been in his power to drive every Southern family to bankruptcy, he would willingly have done so. It was with some pleasure that he added to her distress. Units of the local militia had destroyed bridges to try to delay the Yankee advance, and the cotton gins were to be blown up in retaliation.

To his surprise, Sally was there the following day, sitting in a carriage on the riverbank, the cotton-white, pretty mulatta sittin-beside her, watching as the gins were destroyed. Sally went because she had a complaint to make to the captain, and because she wanted to see the destruction. Half the town was there for the spectacle. The buildings were blown to smither-eens. The riverbank shook with gunpowder.

“How would you have us live now?” Sally asked him, quietly.

He didn’t look at her, and his face betrayed nothing of the vengeful emotions he felt.

“I’ve lost two brothers in this war, ma’am, killed by Johnny Reb,” he said quietly. “I don’t care how you live. Or if you live. “

He tipped his hat to her and rode away.

“I hate him,” Queen said softly, and took Sally’s hand.

Sally shook her head. “He’s only doing his duty.” She could not find hate in her heart now, only an overwhelming sense of sorrow, and of loss.

But Queen had no alternative to hate. On the previous day, some of the captain’s men had beaten her gran’pappy, Cap’n Jack, viciously. Queen had not wanted to come, but Sally in-

come, but Sally-Ann

sisted she be present for her complaint to the captain about the behavior of his men.

They had been taking supplies from the bam, loading them onto a Jackson cart, and Queen had protested they were taking too much. The soldiers had made sport with her.

"Leave us something!" she demanded.

"I'll leave a little bun in your oven, lady," the sergeant laughed. They surrounded her, teasing her, taunting her, thinking her white and a serving girl. They smelled of sweat and state beer; their faces were rough with stubble and their eyes bright with lust.

Queen was terrified. She didn't understand men; she had no experience of them. The house slaves were no threat to her, the field hands were either kind or ignored her, and although a few visiting white men, her father's friends, had winked at her and called her pretty, she had been secure from their advances because of the family. No one had ever taught her how to handle men, for no white woman would bother with instruction, and a slave woman had nothing to teach her, except submission to what the men wanted. The incident of two years ago, in Florence, when the three hooligans accosted her flared in her mind, but they had been boys, and these were soldiers.

She hit their hands away when they touched her, and spat in their faces, but her anger only seemed to excite them more.

"She wants to play," one said, laughing to his companions.

"I know a game she'd like," another grinned. He grabbed at Queen and pulled her to him. He held her face with one hand, her body with the other, and kissed her. She tried to break her mouth away, but he was strong and his grip like a vise. His stubble grazed her face, his rough uniform chafed her body, and she

could feel the hardness of him, at his groin, shoving against her. He pushed his tongue into her mouth. She tried to scream, tried to bite, but he was ready for that, and clutched his hand hard on her jaw, so she could not move it.

She heard a voice. “Don’t touch her!”

It was Cap’n Jack. He had a hefty stick in his hands, raised in the air, ready to strike.

The soldier who was kissing Queen looked at him in surprise.

“Who’s this?” he laughed. “Your fancy man?”

Cap’n Jack hit him across the shoulders with the stick, and they all turned on him. Desire for a pretty girl became lust for blood, and, methodically and efficiently, they beat him senseless, while Queen screamed her distress.

When they were done, Queen ran to him, weeping, screaming for aid.

“Help him, please,” she begged Cap’n Jack’s assailants. “He my gran’pappy.”

The beating had sated them, and when they heard of the family relationship, perhaps they were shamed, the sergeant at least. He called his men to order, and led them away.

Queen ran to the slave quarters for help, and Isaac and Jeremiah had taken Cap’n Jack to his bunk, where Queen nursed him, and bathed his wounds. When Sally was told, she came to see him, and ordered that he be moved to a comfortable bed, in the big house. She complained to the captain, who apologized, reprimanded the men, and ordered the return of the Jackson cart. No further action was taken because Cap’n Jack had hit first.

No one thought he would live.

He did live, after a fashion, for a while. The worst of his external wounds healed, but there was some internal damage. He was almost always in pain, and was incontinent. His mind wandered, and he seldom knew where he was.

There was no physician to attend him; the local doctor had volunteered for the war, and the medical student who was running the practice said nothing could be done and prescribed laudanum.

Queen took charge of him, washed him and bathed him, fed him and changed the sheets on his bed when they were soiled. Sally stayed with him when Queen could not. To everyone's surprise, Lizzie volunteered as well when Queen or Sally needed a break, although mostly she was busy tending the children, for Poppy had to run the household.

For a time Cap'n Jack didn't seem to recognize Queen or Sally, and he seldom spoke, except for a few muttered words-"Annie" and "broke his promise." Toward April, he seemed to get a little better, as if the spring were renewing

him. He recognized people and things, and managed to speak, but the effort of it obviously distressed him. He lay for hours holding Queen's hand, gently caressing it with his thumb, and saying nothing. When Sally was with him, he talked a little more, of the old days in Nashville, and of the ol' Massa, and he always asked about Jass, who was a prisoner of war and of whom there was little news. Talk of Jass's incarceration depressed Cap'n Jack, and he would fall silent, and then mutter a few words of friendship and happiness and youth.

Sally understood his difficulty in speaking, and so she talked instead.

She chattered endlessly about the old days in Nashville, when they were happy, of parties and picnics and pedigree horses, and of mutual friends, of Alfred, who lay in a tomb near his Massa now, loyal slave in life and death, of Chief Doublehead and Monkey Simon.

“Gone. All gone,” Cap’n Jack said. But he would not go himself. It was as if he were waiting for something, some signal that he could leave secure in the knowledge that the better day was coming for those he left behind, as he had always promised.

In early April, they began to hear gunfire. It was distant and muffled, but incessant, continuous. It lasted for two days.

It was the sound of a battle at Shiloh, over twenty miles away. Sometimes the relentless, dull noise caused the glass in the windows to rattle, and the crockery in the cupboards to shimmer. Lizzie heard it, and clutched her children to her. Mrs. Henderson heard it, and moved to the big house.

Sally heard it, and prayed for the dead.

Parson Dick heard it when he was washing dishes. A little tremor caused a cup to rattle on the table. It dropped to the floor and smashed. Parson Dick looked at the plate in his hand. He smiled. And when the cannon fired again, so many miles away, he threw the plate over his shoulder, and let it break where it landed. And another. And another. Parson Dick was laughing now.

The slaves heard the noise when they were gathered around the campfire on that warm spring night, eating their evening meal.

“Awful close,” said Davy.

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“The closer it come, the closer my freedom,” Jeremiah told him. Davy idolized Jeremiah. But not enough to run away with him.

“Oh, man, I’s gwine get me some of that,” Davy dreamed.

Isaac dreamed of it, too, but was more practical. “An’ what you gwine do with

it, boy?" he asked Davy.

"Get me a job," Davy said, surprised by the question. "Earn money."

"You cain't do nuttin' 'cept pick cotton an' empty shit pans, an' yo' ain't too good at that," Isaac said, and the others laughed.

Davy was angry; everyone was always laughing at him, when he tried so hard to please.

"Go North," he sulked, knowing Isaac couldn't have an answer for that.

Everybody talked about going North. The old people called it "Up South"

which Davy thought was stupid.

"An' beg fo' food, an' sleep in ditches?" Isaac burst Davy's bubble.

"Hear tell the Feds is takin' on niggers to fight, payin' 'em, too,"

Jeremiah said, to relieve the pressure on Davy. "Damn, I'd fight for freedom."

"Let's do it, eh?" said Davy, who had a young man's energy.

"Yeh, but yo' better get a good night sleep first, an' make sho' yo'

belly's full," Isaac said. "Ask Jeremiah, he know about freedom."

"It's a'comin', Isaac," Jeremiah replied, still embarrassed from his previous, failed attempt. "Yo' c'n laugh, but it's a'comin'. "

"Yeh," Isaac agreed, dreamily, for he wanted it as much as any of them.

"It's a'comin'."

They drifted to sleep that night to the sound of the guns at Shiloh.

Queen heard the guns, and shivered in fear. Cap'n Jack heard them, and almost smiled.

“What is it, Gran’pappy?” Queen whispered. He mumbled something she couldn’t quite catch, and leaned close to him.

He tried to tell her, but it hurt to talk. He whispered words that he knew she did not hear, but leaned back on his pillow

and smiled. For even if she could not hear’him, he knew she could hear that other sound, and that was all that mattered, for it was the most glorious sound of all. It was the sound he had waited for all his life.

It was the herald of freedom.

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Still Cap’n Jack did not die. He seemed to be waiting for something more than the sound of distant gunfire, and clung tenaciously to a tiny thread of life. Whenever Sally went to see him, he asked about Jass, and she began to understand that he could not bear the idea of his young Massa being a prisoner. His mind had regressed to a happily remembered past.

Often delirious, he would mutter about the days when Jass was a boy, and Cap’n Jack was closer to him than his own father. Confused and irrational, he could not remember that Easter was dead, and talked of the joyous day when Jass came home from the war to Easter. At other times, Jass became confused in his mind with James when he was young, a golden, brawny, Irish youth, who had engulfed Cap’n Jack in friendship and promised him his freedom one day. Eventually, his memories always turned to Annie, and when they did he became bitter, and fell silent.

Queen spent as much time with him as she could. It was a relief to be with him, to escape from her many and increasing duties, for life was becoming, daily, it seemed, tougher for them, and the news from the war bleaker. Queen

had schooled herself to understand that her gran'pappy was dying, and while it distressed her, she was no novice to death now.

Besides, too many other new emotions were claiming attention from her heart.

None of them had experience of war, or of this strange new world without Massas. The duties of life, of the house and plantation, fell increasingly upon the women, but it was not a

life any of them understood. The white women had been brought up to plenty, and scarcity was an alien burden. The slaves had been used to discipline all their lives, and the present disorder of their existence confused most, frightened some. They had existed without hope for tomorrow for all of their lives, and while there was a hope now, of this intangible freedom, it was as elusive as ever and as close as whispered rumors. It was generally believed that it was only a matter of time, but how much time, how long, 0 Lord, how long? The Yankees had come, but had not brought freedom with them. The Rebels had retaken Florence, and the Union troops had retreated to the northern side of the river. The slaves had no understanding of the confusions of war, and lived on rumors of it, but each rumor was contradicted by its successor, and so they clung to the old ways and what they understood their lives to be, but again, without a Massa and an overseer, the old order was gone, and no one celebrated its temporary replacement. Some slaves, the younger men, had been pressed into service by the Confederacy, not to fight but to dig for the sappers.

Law and order, as such, had almost ceased to exist. Pillage and robbery were commonplace and rape was not rare. Bands of men, some in uniform, some not, but all armed, roamed the countryside, taking what they could, at will. To protect themselves against lawlessness, the entire community at The Forks of Cypress was united against the world, although that unity was as temporary as the weather, and would disintegrate at the first positive sign of what the future might be.

They all held their breaths and went about their business, waiting for something to happen, even Cap'n Jack, and when it happened, it was double-edged.

It came to Jass first. Tom Kirkman brought the news to Sally on a warm October day. Jass's imprisoned regiment had been exchanged with a Northern unit. Jass was a free man again. Sally whispered a tiny prayer of thanks for his deliverance, and waited for Tom to tell her the sweet news of her son's return. It was not to be. Jass had been promoted to colonel of his regiment, and was being sent south to Fort Hudson, near Vicksburg, in Mississippi.

Tom had other news of freedom. Lincoln had announced his intention to sign a proclamation emancipating the slaves, in all the states, as if the Confederation did not exist.

"He can't do that," Sally said, knowing that Lincoln could do anything he wanted.

Tom smiled, and agreed with her statement and her thought. If it happened, it seemed likely that those slaves in Southern territories under Union control would be freed. He almost didn't care. He was tired, perpetually tired, and he could not shake off a chill he had caught.

"Here?" Sally wondered, and Tom shrugged. Much of the area around Florence was held by the Federal Army, but battles raged for control of the river, both sides determined to hold what they had, and take what they had not.

"Everywhere," Tom said. "I don't know how he intends to enforce it, but it will bring chaos to us, if it is true." Sally could not imagine how it would directly affect them, as part of the Confederacy, and she put aside concerns for what might happen in the future, and gloried in what had happened now. For Jass was free.

She told Lizzie, who let out a shriek of joy, and went racing to tell the children, but then came running back to find out when Jass was coming home.

On being told that he was not, much of her joy deserted her briefly, and she sulked alone in the sitting room. But still it was good news, or better news than they had heard in a very long time, and, calmer now, she found the children, and hugged them to her, as hard as she had hoped to hug her husband.

There was someone else to tell. Sally climbed the stairs slowly and paused to catch her breath on the landing. Then she went up the little attic stairs to Cap'n Jack.

Queen was with him, bathing his chest. The room smelled awful, of waste and illness, and that other rich and heady aroma that Sally knew betokened the presence of death.

Queen covered Cap'n Jack with a blanket when Sally came in.

- He say he dyin',” she blurted, grumpily. “I can't talk him out of it. “

“The Massa has been freed,” Sally said softly, so that Cap'n Jack would not hear. She saw a light sparkle in Queen's eyes, one she had not seen for months.

Queen stared at Sally, hardly daring to believe that it was true.

“When he coming home?” she asked.

“Not for a little while,” Sally told her, guessing that Queen wanted to be somewhere else. To be alone, perhaps.

“I'll stay with him,” she said. Queen nodded, trying to contain her joy.

She made Cap'n Jack as comfortable as she could as quickly as she could, and then went to the door.

“Thank you, Missy,” Queen said. “I got to tell Mammy.”

She hurried from the room. Sally smiled. She understood the girl's need to be

at her mother's grave, to tell her news she could not hear, and wondered why she felt no need to tell James. Or be with him, beside him, alone in the silent cemetery with the man whom she had loved.

When Queen had gone, Sally settled in the chair beside the bed, and took Cap'n Jack's hand, to let him know that she was there.

He seemed lost to her, in some other world, and for a moment Sally thought he might be gone already, but then he opened his eyes and stared at her.

"I dyin', Missy," he said.

"Now why on earth would you want to do that?" Sally said gently. "When the Massa's coming home."

She knew he understood, because a duller version of the same sparkle that had brightened Queen's eyes glittered into his. His lips moved in what she knew to be a silent prayer.

"Massa Jass free," he said. "Now I can die happy. The good Lord's a'callin' me, Missy."

"I'm sure He would wait a while," Sally said, knowing He would not.

"Massa Jass free," Cap'n Jack said again. "Oh, blessed freedom."

Suddenly, Sally understood what he had been waiting for, why he would not leave, and she wanted to fulfill his dream.

"And you are free," she said.

Cap'n Jack stared at her.

"You've been free for a very long time," she continued. "I have the paper downstairs in the safe. Massa James gave it to me years ago, believing you would ask for it one day."

It wasn't true. James had told her, years ago, of his offer

of freedom to Cap'n Jack, and of his subsequent refusal. Furious with his slave, he had burned the paper.

"If he ever wants it, he'll damn well have to ask for it," James had said.

But what did it matter now, if he asked or it was given? Sickness, weariness, pain, seemed to vanish from Cap'n Jack's eyes. If I have done nothing else good in my life, Sally thought, I have done this.

"Free." Was it a question or a statement? Sally couldn't tell, and it didn't matter. The lies were nothing. The result was all.

- And soon all the slaves will be free," she said. Perhaps they would, if Lincoln had his way.

Cap'n Jack smiled, then frowned. "Queen?"

"Queen and all the slaves," Sally reassured him. "Very soon.

"Oh, Lordy," Cap'n Jack whispered. He closed his eyes, and squeezed her hand. Then he turned away from her, turned to the wall.

Sally sat holding his hand, and felt his grip slowly loosen until there was nothing of it left.

She looked about the empty room, and tears stung her eyes.

"What on earth am I going to do without him?" she cried out to no one, and was unable to control her choking voice.

They buried him in the slaves' graveyard, next to Easter. No one cried, because no one had any more tears to shed. The war had left them bereft, not of grief but of the means to express it. They moved through life now in an emotional vacuum, accepting whatever was given them, and little of it was good.

Sally stood next to Queen at the grave and read her favorite passage from the

Book of Common Prayer, which spoke of loss in terms of hope.

“We seem to give him back to Thee, 0 Lord, who gavest him to us. But as Thou didst not lose him in the giving, we shall not lose him by his return.”

When the service was done, Queen helped Sally down the hill. They did not speak to each other because they had no need to speak. They simply shielded each other against loss.

Soon after, rumors began to fly among the slaves, and life and vigor returned to them, and the mounting optimism of the slaves was matched by the increasing pessimism of the whites.

And Queen was petrified.

She heard the rumors, but no joy came to her with them. She snapped angrily at those who told her the news, and said it hadn’t happened yet, and it didn’t affect her. What worried her was that it might. She threw herself into preparations for Christmas with febrile energy, and when the blessed feast came, she tried to make herself indispensable to the family, as if she belonged to them, was part of them. They had no idea of the fear besieging her, and treated her no differently than usual. Or perhaps they did, a little, for her unspoken but incessant demand for proof of their affection, for some recognition of her place with them, wearied them and caused them to snap at her. So Queen’s fears magnified.

She didn’t dare ask Sally if the rumor was true, for fear that it was.

She wouldn’t ask Lizzie, and, with Cap’n Jack gone, there was only one person she trusted.

She went to Parson Dick’s room one night, and tapped on his door. She heard fear in his voice when he asked who it was, and when she told him, there was silence. She went in. Parson Dick was packing, stuffing his clothes into a big old

bag made of carpet.

“What you doin’?” she asked.

“Getting out of here,” he told her.

She panicked. “But vou can’t!” she cried. “We belong here.

“I don’t ‘belong’ here, I don’t belong to no one,” he said. “An’ now Abe Lincoln’s made that legal.”

“We still slaves!” she insisted. “This ain’t the North. Abe Lincoln can’t do nuttin’ down here.”

The rumor was that Abraham Lincoln had issued a proclamation freeing all the slaves, in any state, as of the first day of the coming New Year.

“We can get away is what we can do,” Parson Dick said. “Over the river, to Union lines.”

“They catch you, they bring you back, whip you good!” Queen tried to sound casual, but failed, and Parson Dick laughed at her.

“They ain’t going to waste time catching slaves now; there’ll be too many on the run!”

He looked at the miserable Queen and felt a sweep of pity for her.

“You come with me and Ruby,” he said. “We look after you. “

Queen shook her head, defiantly.

“This here is my home,” she said. “This here is my family. “

“You ain’t nothin’ to them, ‘cept some skivvy slave,” he replied. But she did

not hear him, or did not want to.

“Colonel Jass is my pappy,” she said.

Parson Dick understood her fear, and the foolishness of her dream, “Oh, girl,” he said gently. “What you think your pappy’s going to do? You think he’s going to raise you into the bosom of his family, and say to all the world you is his true-born daughter?”

Queen looked at him uncertainly. That was what she wanted to happen, what she wanted to believe would happen, but faced with the actuality of it, it seemed unreal.

“Slavery’s finished, thank the good Lord in heaven.” Parson Dick pressed his point. “But it going to bring hard times for the Massas, and they going to stick to each other like glue. They never going to admit that all those mulattos and quadroons and octoroons and Lord knows how many ‘roons is begat out of white blood!”

Queen was trembling, and shaking her head. She didn’t want to hear any more.

“You stay here, you nothing, you worse than nothing, coz they won’t even admit that you exist,” he said softly, sadly, accurately predicting her future.

“It ain’t true!” she cried. “You don’t know! My pappy loves me!”

Crying, she ran from the room. She stumbled down the back stairs and into the kitchen. She stood in the middle of the room, gasping, panting, not knowing what to do. A ferocious energy invaded her, and she began to clean what was already clean, scrub what was already scrubbed, tidy what was already neat, as if the faultless management of the house proved her indispensability to it.

A few hours later, when everyone was asleep, Parson Dick crept from the

house to the stables. He took an old nag, fair wages, he thought, for his years of service, and rode into the night. He met Ruby at a bend in the river near Florence, a spot they had arranged in whispered assignations conveyed by the seed merchant's assistant. They spent the day in the woods, and the following evening they stole an old rowboat they found on the riverbank, and made their way across the river. By morning, they were behind Union lines and threw themselves on the mercy of some soldiers.

Although they were treated roughly, as runaways, they were fed, given the use of a tent, and no serious attempt was made to return them to their owners. With the tolling of the church bells on New Year's Day, they were free.

Those same church bells proclaiming the New Year sounded ominous to Sally, tolling for a way of life that was dying. The Emancipation Proclamation had no direct effect on themthey were beyond its jurisdiction-but already it was working indirectly. It hurt her deeply that Parson Dick, most reliable, she had thought, of their, slaves, had been the first to take advantage of this new situation, for she had little doubt as to what he had done, and others, she was convinced, would follow. The..Union Army, Northern law, was too tantalizingly close to them. Yet she had to do everything in her power to stop them from going, even if that meant the unthinkable. Hands were needed to run the farm, for without the farm the whites could not live, and Sally was aware of the paradox. The white South depended on the enslaved blacks for their very survival. They did not have the means to keep the slaves against their will if they chose to go, and Sally determined that she must make them choose to stay.

Once again, she had them gathered into the clearing, although Isaac was in charge of them now, and she came to them as supplicant, not as mistress. She told no one else of her plan. Lizzie would not understand, Tom would disapprove, and Mrs. Henderson would resist it fiercely. It was possible that if it was generally known, Sally would be accused of treachery to the cause.

"Abe Lincoln has issued an order making all slaves in

United States territory free," she began, and stopped again for a moment. It was not easy for her. She heard the muttered prayers of some of the slaves.

If the Missy was telling them, then the rumors were true. Free at last, free at last.

"That order does not apply to this plantation, or any in the Confederacy,"

Sally continued, and heard the sharp intakes of breath, the audible disappointment. "But the army of the United States is only twenty miles away, freedom is only twenty miles away, and I do not have the means to make you stay. -

She knew that they didn't understand why she was telling them what they already knew.

"And so you are free," she said. "Free to do what you want, go where you will."

The reaction surprised her, for there was none. She could hear the wind rustling in the leafless branches of the trees, but she could not even hear the slaves breathe. Then she became aware of another sound, close to her.

Queen standing two feet behind her, as if to reinforce her own position, was crying.

"There is nowhere you can go, except,to the enemy, for in the South, if you go and you are caught, you will be treated as runaways. And if you go to the North, you will be enlisted into the army, to fight against us.

Possibly to die."

She was surrounded by bewilderment. Freedom had come, but somehow it seemed empty. Jeremiah spoke for the many.

"What c'n we do, Missy?" he asked Sally.

"You can stay," she said. "I need you to work the land. I cannot pay you anything, but I will share with you what we have. You will eat as we eat, and live as we live. When the war is over and the Massa returns, when the future is clearer, we may make other arrangements. For the moment, all I can offer you is

a safe place to be, a roof for your heads, and a bed to sleep in."

She stopped. It was too hard; she couldn't do it. All her formidable resources suddenly deserted her, and she wanted to break down and weep. It had come to this: It was she who had to bring the whole house of cards tumbling down. And it had been so easy. And yet it was too hard. Tears filled her eyes. She could not bear that they might go, she feared too genuinely for their welfare, and her own and her family's, but she could not believe that they might stay.

"What you gwine do if'n we go?" Jeremiah asked her.

"I don't know," Sally told him honestly. "Pray for you. Pray for all of us."

There was silence again, and the sound of shuffling feet. Jeremiah was the spokesman, the leader. It rested on him. The weight of the decision frustrated him. It had all seemed so easy. They would be free and they would go and make new lives for themselves. But they were free, and where could they go? Very few of them actually wanted to go North now. It was alien land to them, enemy country, and filled with war and danger. Most of them had been bom and grown up on this plantation; very few of them had any concept of the world beyond it, and those who did, like Jeremiah, had no affection for it. In the short days of his escape, he had never been so hungry in his life. He could go, and make it to Union lines, and even join the army, fight for freedom, but he had freedom, Missy Sally had given it to him, so what was there to fight for'? Here was food, here was shelter, here was what he knew. This was his place. It was so easy.

Everything else was too hard.

"An' if'n we stay, we free?" he asked, trying to establish his options.

"If you stay, you are free," Sally assured him.

Jeremiah shrugged.

“I reckon I gwine stay, fo’ a Fil while, anyways,” he told the others.

“This here the only home I got.”

He walked away, and slowly the others followed. They talked about it later, when Sally was gone, and most of them agreed with Jeremiah. They would stay, for a little while anyway, because they had no other place to go. What astonished them was that they felt no different, now that they were free. It took some little while for them to comprehend the majesty of what they had. And when they did, they had a party.

Sally stood in the clearing, watching the slaves shuffle away. She had won; she had achieved what had to be done; she had ensured, for the moment at least, the survival of her family, in some form or other. Later decisions were for later. If, as the truth of their new situation dawned on them, some few ran away, she would cope with that then. If, by some miracle, the

South won the war, which Sally didn’t believe was going to happen, the institution of slavery would have to change, and they would face those complications then. If, when Jass came home, he wanted to rescind her order, that was his business and would be coped with then, but he could only do it if there was a Southern victory. All Sally had done, she told herself, was to accept the inevitable. At this moment, the whites needed the nigras to survive, and, at this moment, survival was all she cared about.

She turned to Queen. Drained of all energy, she needed the girl’s help to walk back to the big house.

But Queen was not there.

Terrified by the prospects Sally had offered the slaves, for Queen had no doubt

Terrified by the prospects Sally had offered the slaves, for Queen had no doubt she was included, she ran to her mother's grave, and knelt beside it.

"I's free, Mammy, I's free," she whispered.

And wondered why she was so very scared.

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The war ground on, each day bringing them closer to a conclusion that even the most sanguine Southerner began to accept as inevitable. They hardly understood why they fought anymore. For every inch of ground they gained, they seemed to lose two. But not to fight was unthinkable. A stand had been taken and must be upheld. They no longer fought to win, they fought not to lose, but every battle seemed to bring retreat, or, if it was won, news of another loss elsewhere.

Jass could justifiably have applied for leave on many occasions, to go home and spend some days with his family, but he chose not to. His life had become war, and unfamiliar country places its battlegrounds. Edwards Depot and Big Black Bridge. Fort Hudson and Champion Hills. Vicksburg. They abandoned Mississippi, harried every inch of the way by the

avenging General Grant, and his regiment, or what was left of it, was sent to Georgia. Every skirmish lost, every yard of ground surrendered, brought Jass closer to home, until he thought he must stand and fight alone on the very steps of The Forks of Cypress. Wounds had hardly healed before new injuries claimed his attention, but he was impervious to them now, inured to pain. He was as indifferent to the recognitions of his valor that were bestowed upon him; his medals had no more meaning to him than his scars.

Honor was his only armor, and this he wore with immeasurable pride. He had no fear of death, for it was a proper alternative to defeat, but it eluded him and condemned him to face the greater loss, of country, and of cause.

When they told him that he must lose an arm, smashed up in a battle for an indefensible mountain pass at Kennesaw, he had only two questions.

“Will I be discharged?” was the first.

The doctor shook his head. “Colonels don’t need two arms,” he said, preparing for the operation. “But we need every man we can get.”

Jass could face the rest of his life without an arm, for the odds were that his life would not be long. He could not live with failure.

“Will it hurt?” he asked, as the doctor picked up a saw.

“Like thunder,” the doctor told him, nodding at two orderlies to hold Jass down. “And I have nothing to ease the pain.”

Jass nodded and closed his eyes. He felt the firm grip of the orderlies, and then a searing, screaming pain as the doctor began his work.

Florence fell again to the Yankees, and the citizens lived in fear of the destruction that must come. Atlanta was gone, burned, burned to the ground, not one brick of the proud and noble city left. Sweet Atlanta, capital of Southern dreams, gone to ashes. Sherman was marching from there to the sea, his army leaving a swath of desolation and destruction, of barren land, in its wake. Any Southern victory, no matter how small, was followed by a Yankee retribution many times greater than the provocation.

But Florence was not destroyed.

Colonel William Hamilton of the U.S. Army was a gracious soldier, who sought victory, not vengeance. He established his headquarters at the Coffee plantation, and concerned himself for the welfare of his unwilling hosts. He gave orders that the citizens were not to be molested, and came to be known as “the good

Yankee" for his charity.

He attended the funeral of Tom Kirkman, who had died, wom out from worry and overwork and loss of faith in the future, and was gracious to Elizabeth, the widow, and to Sally and Lizzie, who no longer cared if solace wore blue or gray. Death was a constant in their lives. Tom, and his son James, killed in battle, and his little granddaughter, Ellen, Sam's child. Every woman in Florence wore black, not just to the funeral, for every woman had reason to, and the most fervent prayer of all of them was that the nightmare end soon.

Yet it was not to be. Already, a Confederate force under General Forrest was moving upriver toward the town, which must become a battleground again, and while they longed to be ruled by their own, they wanted the war to be over.

Sally dared to ask Colonel Hamilton when he thought the end would come, and he was kind but not gentle to her.

"When you give in," he smiled. "Or when we conquer you, for that will be the inevitable result of your failure to surrender. Apart from those already under arms, we are amassing an army of half a million men, and you cannot withstand that. "

Sally turned away, appalled by the immensity of it, and by the bleakness of their prospects. Hamilton was a reasonable man in victory. She could not imagine every Yankee would be the same.

"The South cannot win, and the North will not lose," he continued. "What should be of greater concern to all of us is what happens afterward."

That, at least, Sally could agree with, and thoughts of a postwar South troubled her mind as they rode home. They would have no slaves, and while she doubted that there would be a mass migration of blacks from South to North, she understood that the relationship between the races would be radically changed. It was already. Perhaps half her freed slaves had

stayed; the others had drifted away as opportunity presented itself, or dreaming provoked. Some younger men had enlisted in the Union Army, and two girls had become whores, camp followers of Northern troops. Those that were left at The Forks were different people now, truculent if given orders, lazy if they did not understand why something had to be done. They worked for themselves rather than the general good, as if preparing for the time when they would leave.

As the blacks became more self-reliant, less dependent on their former Massas and Missys, so the whites withdrew into themselves, isolating themselves, and the previous free discourse between the two races was at a minimum. Sally had not been alone in her precipitate action of freeing the slaves, and awful stories reached them of blacks taking vengeance on their erstwhile Massas. Some houses had been burned to the ground before the blacks escaped to the North, and, in one scandalous case, some bucks had whipped their aging Massa. It foreshadowed the chaos that every white believed would accompany black freedom, and even at The Forks the women did not feel safe.

Jeremiah, who, to Sally's surprise, had stayed, was hardly with them anymore, making himself invaluable to the Union troops, shoeing their horses, hammering their iron, and receiving payment for his services. It was only a matter of time before they lost him, Sally was sure.

Queen had stayed. Inevitably, Sally thought, and it was Queen who concerned her now. In the coming postwar society of whites, there would be no room for Queen, who was trying to insinuate herself more and more into the family's embrace. There had been an altercation that morning, when Lizzie had refused to allow Queen to attend Tom's funeral.

"But he family," Queen grumbled.

"Not your family," Lizzie snapped, thinking that was the end of it.

But it was not the end of it. Sally knew there was more to be done. It would be hard and it would be cruel, but it was unavoidable.

Queen herself provided the opportunity. There was no tea or real coffee because of the Northern blockade of Southern

ports, but they had developed a curious substitute out of ground-up hickory acorns. Queen brought a cup of the brew to Sally in the sitting room. Lizzie was upstairs, supervising William's schoolwork. Little James and Eleanor were napping.

Sally sipped her drink, and Queen did not leave. She asked a few questions about the funeral, still obviously irked that she had been barred from attending, and then announced her news.

"Jeremiah gone," she said. "Jus' upped an' left. Didn't even say to tell you goodbye."

Sally nodded, for it came as no surprise to her. She also knew that Queen was reminding her of her own loyalty.

"Do we know where he has gone?" she asked Queen.

"Workin' for the Yankee army, I guess," Queen shrugged. "He jus' a no-account nigger."

She went to the door, but Sally spoke before she left the room.

"And where will you go, Queen?" she said.

Queen stopped. Perhaps it was the moment she had been dreading.

"Now you are free, you must think about where you will go, and what you will do," Sally continued.

Queen did not turn to look at her.

"I ain't going nowhere," she muttered. "I stay here and serve you. "

The tiny silence that followed was filled with volumes of unspoken emotion.

The inevitable confrontation had come, and Queen prayed with all her heart that Sally would give her the answer she longed to hear, and refused to consider

that she would not.

“We have no place for you here,” Sally said softly, and the words formed ice in Queen’s heart.

Still Queen did not look at her.

“But this is my home,” she whispered.

She should have turned to Sally, for then she would have seen the tiny tears that Sally now brusquely brushed away. There was another silence, while Sally composed herself to the task at hand. It was not easy for her, because she loved Queen. But nothing was easy for her these days, and it had to be done. For both their sakes.

“The world as we know it has gone,” Sally said, more

calmly than she felt. “And it can only get worse. We cannot feed the family even now, and after the war I don’t know what we will do.”

Now Queen turned to her, ran to her, knelt at her feet. But it was too late.

“I help you, Missy,” she cried. “I cook and clean and garden. I do everything!”

Sally took her sweet face in her hands. Oh, she loved Queen and did not want her to go. But she could not let her stay.

“Child, we love you and have tried to do right by you,” she said. “But you are a nigra, and the times will be hard. Your best place will be with your own people.”

Queen was shaking her head, fighting Sally’s grip, wanting her embrace.

“I ain’t a nigra, I’s white!” she screamed. “My pappy won’t let you turn me away!”

Sally used all her strength to hold the girl's face firm, and looked hard into her eyes. She spoke with absolute resolve.

"You must never think of Colonel Jackson as your pappy," she commanded.

"You are a child of the plantation, like thousands upon thousands of others. And that is all."

Queen could not believe the firmness of Sally's voice, or the coldness in her eyes, or the truth of what she was hearing.

"No!" she screamed again. "I'll never leave. You are my people! -

She scrabbled to her feet, and ran to the door.

"You are my family!" she shouted angrily at Sally. She left the room, slamming the door.

Alone, Sally found that her distress was battling a deep and rising anger.

They had been so stupid. There should never have been union. After an alliance with the North to drive out the British, the Southern states should have gone their own way, formed their confederacy then, all those years ago, and none of these present disasters would have happened. Some few, romantic, idealistic men had rammed through a panAmerican concept with scant regard for the people it might affect the most. Like the Indians, the nigras had never been seriously considered by the founding fathers,-in their rush to white independence, the Northerners because they had so few

of them, the South because they had no problem. But it was not possible, and never had been, for slave states to imagine they could share government with slave-free states. And like the Indians in the grab for land, who was paying the price of this lack of foresight now but those same nigras that everyone claimed

they were fighting to protect? If the South had gone its own way, become its own country eighty years ago, then Queen's predicament would never have arisen. Oh, they had been so happy.

Why could not those damn Yankees leave them alone?

Queen had no such thoughts. Filled with an anger far more complex than Sally's, and a hurt and a loneliness far-deeper, she ran from the house, without any sense of purpose or direction. She might have run to the graveyard and called her distress to her mammy, but it was not her mammy she needed now, and not selfpity that possessed her, but rather a raging anger at her dispossession. She ran to the deserted weaving house instead, and fell on the bed where she had been conceived, weeping, and called out her love for her pappy.

62

When peace came, in a gentle spring, it was not as a benediction but as an anticlimax, coupled with relief and an absolute sense of desolation.

They hardly dared look at the ravaged country, for there was nothing. What had once been another Eden was a wasteland, barren and bankrupt.

The men straggling back from the war had no choice but to see the devastation, and to comprehend its vastness. After the surrender of the South, the soldiers of the Confederate Army laid down their weapons and began their long walk home. Penniless, dispirited, hopeless, they trod through fields that had once been fertile, along roads that had once resounded with bustling business. As they marched, they were joined by

a new army, a fulsome, extravagant, free-spending army. An army of Northern opportunists, who saw in the ravaged South a feeding ground of opportunity for

opportunists, who saw in the ravaged South a feeding ground of opportunity for fortunes as yet unmade. The generals of this army had noble ambitions for the reconstruction of the South, but the foot soldiers wore florid suits, carried carpetbags stuffed with the most precious ammunition, Federal banknotes, and their training manual was a bible of chicanery. Marching with them came other battalions of highminded missionaries, devoted to the capture of the newly freed black souls, while many of the mortal targets they sought passed them by, walking North to promised riches.

"All them niggers let loose on the world," Henderson said to a weary companion. The bitterness of the veterans was intense. Everyone, it seemed, had food in their bellies but them. Even the poorest of the carpetbagging businessmen was rich compared to those who had fought for the South. The missionaries came with the blessing of their Northern churches, or their own life savings, and fed any hungry black they saw.

But for the whites, for the soldiers, there was nothing but further abasement.

Henderson had walked for days. He had been stationed at Richmond in Virginia since his promotion to sergeant three years ago, and had seen the vagaries of the war from its front lines. His regiment had laid down its arms the day before the general surrender at Appomattox, and after ten days of indecision and enforced idleness, and infinite frustration, bright news had come to them. Lincoln, wretched Lincoln, architect of their destruction, had been killed, shot to death by some righteous, avenging angel. The men of the South had cheered and hollered at the news, and picked fights with their Northern captors. Order had been restored with rifle butts and broken bones, and the following day they had been told to go home, by whatever means they could. Which meant walking. There was not a horse or cart to be had, even for ready money, which was in shorter supply.

Footsore and weary, nursing new blisters and old grievances, Henderson was resting with a hundred other veterans outside a barn. A sympathetic farmer had given the veterans use of his outbuildings, and scores of men were resting there. Blacks,

walking North, used the fields opposite as their resting place. No Confederate soldier would have shared his sanctuary with them, even though there was no Confederacy left. And carpetbaggers were practicing their craft. One of them stood under a tree near the returning soldiers, hawking his dollars.

"Any man who wants to sell his land, I'll give him a fair price for it!" he barked at the broken men. "Cash money! Greenbacks! No questions asked."

"I got five fair acres in Georgia," a man responded. Five fair acres was all he had. Confederate troops had not been paid in weeks, or months, and anyway, the Confederate dollar was worthless paper. He sold his five acres for five dollars, which was a fortune to him.

"A man could buy the whole South for a good honest meal," Henderson said to the veterans near him. No one replied, although they all agreed with him.

At that moment, they would have sold their souls for a good honest meal.

But not Henderson. All he had to do was get back to'The Forks of Cypress, where a comparative treasure awaited him, God willing, tucked away in a little box under some floorboards in his cottage. He had told no one, not even Letitia, of its existence, and while he knew her life had been hard while he was away, he guessed that the Jacksons would have provided basic necessities for her. Besides, a little suffering, a little hunger, a little deprivation, would be good for her. It was nothing compared with what he had been through, and might knock some of the edges off her. So, barring some terrible accident, fire or flood, which were both unlikely, or marauding Yankees, which was possible, be expected to find his store of gold intact when he returned. Andhe would be, comparatively, rich. Yet all the gold on earth col~ld only partially alleviate his bitterness.

Everything that he had~striven so hard to achieve was meaningless, for the slaves were ascendant, and the white man trash. Often his thoughts turned to his dead mother, and he could not bear to think that her lifelong struggle for existence had been without sense or meaning, and that her place in the scheme of things had been reduced to less than that of the humblest nigger.

Like the poor black who stood before him now, begging for food. There were no missionaries nearby, and the black, who

had been called Washington by his hopeful mother, had accepted in good faith the promise of Abraham Lincoln. All men, whatever their color, were equal now. On his way to the city that bore his name, whose streets, he was told, were paved with gold, he hadn't eaten for two days, and doubted that the returning soldiers camped in the barn had much to share, but might have something.

"Get away from me, you nigger bastard," Henderson drawled lazily at the man. "Or you'll wish you'd never been bom. "

Washington bridled inside, but stood his ground. Perhaps this veteran hadn't heard the news.

"Yo' cain't do nuttin' to me," he said. "I's free now."

Henderson stared at him, secure in his recent rank, his expected wealth, and the authority given to the whites, he believed, by God.

"Can't IT' he said, and his tone was the more ominous for its powerful understatement. "Listen to me, boy, and you listen good. You get your ass out of here, get to your Yankee friends as fast as you know how."

The other white soldiers said nothing, but their hearts were with him, Henderson knew. All they needed was a leader. All they needed was someone to voice what they all felt.

"We might have lost the war," Henderson continued, seizing the moment.

"But we're men, and we can still fight, and we will. You ever get in my way, you or any of your jungle kin, and we will come to you in the dead of night, with flames of retribution, and roast you so good, hell will seem like a better idea."

He had not prepared the words-they came to him from some deep, dark place in his soul-but as he said them he saw what he described, and it made him feel

better. It also made his companions feel better. Listlessness about their condition gave way to unspoken hostility, directed generally to all niggers, and, at this moment, to just one, whose name was Washington.

“I wam you, boy, it’s acoming,” Henderson said.

No one doubted him, certainly not Washington, who was scared by what had been said, and by the palpable atmosphere of violence the words had evoked.

“Yes, sub, Massa,” Washington said, already moving away. “I sorry, Massa.”

Henderson watched the retreat of Washington with a small sense of triumph. It had been so easy. It would be as easy, in the future.

He turned to his enraptured audience of disadvantaged whites, and felt the heady taste of power.

“Giving ‘em freedom, giving ‘em the vote, it don’t make a lick of difference,” he said. “They’re still niggers.”

Some men nodded, and a couple moved closer to him, younger men, who longed for action, and for whom the defeat had been especially bitter, as if reassured by his easy, commanding presence. They talked into the night, of the future, of the protection of their families, and of the sweet smell of burning nigger flesh.

Henderson slept well that night, for the first time in weeks. He hadn’t felt so good since he heard of Lincoln’s assassination, which he saw as divine and proper retribution. The future was looking good after all. The war was not over; it would simply be conducted differently now, covertly, by small groups of likeminded, true Southern men. And women, for he had no doubt that Letitia would share his purpose, and even less doubt that Letitia would be alone.

“Let the niggers have their day,” he said to his newfound friends before he

bunked down. “A long, dark night is coming.”

63

Queen had solved the problem of leaving The Forks of Cy press by the simple expedient of not going. Sally had not put a time on her departure; she had simply indicated that Queen should go at some time after the war, but when the war ended, the Massa would come home, and everything would be all right again. The Massa wouldn’t make her leave; her pappy

wouldn’t make her go. So she stayed, and did all that she had promised she would. She cooked and cleaned and scrubbed and gardened, and tended to the household as if they were her own dear family, which, in her mind, they were.

She could not run the fields-that was beyond her-for as the Southern defeat became more and more obvious, more and more slaves decided to take their chances on another life, and left The Forks in search of a new bright day. Gradually, the mansion fell into disrepair, and the land became useless, the fields untended, the cotton unplanted, the fences unfixed. By the time the war ended, only old Isaac and young Davy were left to struggle against Nature’s reclamation of its own, and even they had their hopes set on somewhere else. There was so much to do, they chose to do none of it, and spent their days whittling and dreaming.

“What we gonna do, then?” Davy asked Isaac, as he did every day. “Go, I guess,” Isaac replied, as he did every day.

Davy nodded. He wanted to go; he wanted some adventure, some high life, some fun. He thought Isaac would go too, and didn’t want to leave without him, but their choices of destination were so many they could never make a decision, and they had a residual loyalty to this place. Or to Missy Sally, who was kind to them, which amounted to the same thing.

“Ev’ry nigger goin’ North,” Davy said, hoping they could decide on a direction, if not a haven. Really, he wanted to go somewhere else. “Be full up with black folk soon.”

Isaac looked at the empty, wasting fields. “We could stay,” he said. “We ain’t got nowhere else.”

But Davy was young, and, like a bird who has no alternative but to fly from the nest, whatever the danger of falling, he wanted to stretch his newly freed wings.

“No, man!” he cried. “I wants me some freedom!” He knew Isaac wanted it too, just to try the taste of it. After all, if they didn’t like it, they could always come back. “Hear tell y’c’n have a high ol’ time in N’Orleens.”

He had heard wonderful stories, of music and dancing and beautiful women who were only too ready to cosset an energetic young man, and Davy had energy to spare, when there was something he wanted to do.

Isaac didn’t seem all that keen on New Orleans, and they

lapsed into silence, Davy contemplating unfulfilled lust, and Isaac wondering why he felt no real urge to go anywhere.

Queen banged her way out of the kitchen door, in a grumpy mood. She was always grumpy these days. She saw Isaac and Davy sitting whittling by the well, and wanted to bang their lazy heads together.

“Cut me some firewood, Davy,” she yelled. She came to the well with her bucket, and stood waiting for Isaac to draw water. Isaac clambered to his feet, but Davy still wasn’t too sure of this freedom thing, and wondered how far it could be pushed.

“Don’t feel like it, Missy Queen,” he drawled, sticking a straw in his mouth and lazing back on the grass. “I’s free now.

Queen could, when she wanted to, turn it on. “Well, you better start feelin’ like it, and get yo’ free nigger ass choppin’ wood, or you don’t get fed!” she exploded.

Davy, who had taken orders all his life, and knew nothing else, looked uncertainly at Isaac, who chuckled.

“Ain’t no one else gwine feed yo’,” he told the reluctant boy. “An’ yo’

cain’t cook.”

That surely was the truth and persuaded Davy to action, although he still thought that freedom meant more than it seemed to. But it was not sensible to argue with Queen, who was in charge of the kitchen, in charge of everything, and had a very short temper. He got to his feet and wandered off to the woodpile.

“I’s a-choppin’, Missy Queen,” he assured her reluctantly. I Is a-choppin’.”

Queen sniffed, and waited for Isaac to fill her bucket. She didn’t speak to him, because he was only an ol’ nigger, and she was family.

:‘Pretty day,” Isaac said, to break the silence.

‘An’ you better get fixin’ the plow, or you don’t get fed either,” Queen snapped, and toted her bucket of water back to the house.

Isaac watched her go. There was no point in fixing the plow, because even if the fields were tilled, there was no seed to plant, and he was bored with taking orders from that grumpy half-caste girl. Davy was right, they should go. Even if they

ended up living on the land, like a few other ex-slaves from the Forks, camped in the forest only a few miles from their former home, they would be their own men, in charge of their own existence. While they stayed, though, it was better to keep out of Queen’s sight. lie wandered off to the barn as if to repair the plow,

but once inside he settled on some straw and took a little nap. It was a warm day.

In the kitchen, Queen banged a pot on the stove and filled it with well water, to boil. The weight of the bucket had strained her arms, and she was tired, always tired.

"Workin' my po' fingers to the bone, for folks as don't appreciate it,"

she told the empty room. Or God, to Whom she voiced her many grievances these days.

She slumped in a chair at the table while she waited for the water to boil. If only the Massa would come home, he would appreciate how very hard she worked, he would be kind to her, and make her feel as if she mattered. Miss Sally and Miss Lizzie couldn't manage without her, but they never said thank you or please, never spoke to her, pretended she wasn't there, that she didn't even exist. She did everything for them, and for the children when they were here-cleaned their clothes, cooked their food, emptied their bedpans-and they accepted it all, as if it happened by magic. She couldn't go on, she was exhausted, site hadn't even had time to visit her mother's grave in weeks, there was so much else to do. But she had to go on, somehow; it could only be a few more days, at the very most, and then he would be home again.

01' Massa Henderson had come home last week; he'd been in fine spirits even though he'd walked a thousand miles, cheery and jolly, although not to Queen, and had whisked his wife away for a holiday in Charleston, to see her family. He seemed to have money, she didn't know how-perhaps soldiers were paid a lot. He talked of buying a general store, of setting up in business for himself. If soldiers were well paid, the Massa would have money when he came home, and that would be such a relief; she wouldn't have to scrimp and save every penny that Miss Sally gave her, and wonder how on earth she could feed the family that night. But Massa Henderson had no word of Jass, nor had Miss Sally heard anything from him.

She knew he'd lost an arm. A letter had come last year, and Miss Sally couldn't read well anymore. She'd left the letter lying on her table and when Queen came in to clean the room had wondered aloud, of no one, what news it might bring. So Queen had read the letter, and Jass said he couldn't imagine why the good Lord had given him two arms because he was doing just fine with one. Miss Sally had cried, but still wouldn't admit that Queen was there. It was as if she were listening to a ghost, someone who had been there once, and wasn't anymore.

Queen had cried that night, and hoped that losing the arin hadn't hurt too much, and tried to imagine what he looked like. It didn't make any difference, he was her pappy, and she'd look after him and take care of him, nurse his body if he needed it and his soul if he would let her. One of the dogs had lost a leg once, caught in a trap, and rather than put him down, old Solomon had nursed the animal back to health, and kept him as his own. The dog managed fine with only three legs, and was a sweet, dear thing. Queen's heart had gone out to him, and she had always tried to save a few tidbits from the table for him. It wouldn't worry her that her pappy's body was incomplete. It would make him need her more.

The water boiled, and she made the fake coffee, reminding herself that she had to roast and grind some more acorns, poured two cups of the drink, put them on a tray, and left the kitchen. Deliberately, she went the long way to the sitting room, through the hall, because she was taking stock of what had to be done before the Massa came home. Paper was peeling from the walls. The drapes needed to be washed. She couldn't possibly do it all.

Sally and Lizzie were in the sitting room, enjoying the spring day. It was a mercy that warrn weather had come because they couldn't spare wood for a fire. Lizzie was doing tapestry work, to make some cushions. Sally, her eyes failing, was struggling to sew a patch on young James's pants.

William and Eleanor lived in Florence these days, with their aunt Elizabeth. It made it easier for them to go to school, for the road was too dangerous to travel every day. They couldn't afford a tutor these days, and anyway there were none to be had. They could

hardly afford the school fees. Now James had also gone to stay with Elizabeth, to be with his brother and sister, and to prepare for school.

Life on the deserted plantation was no place for a growing boy.

Jass must come home soon, Sally thought. They couldn't manage much longer. She had avoided digging up the small store of gold that Jass had buried at the beginning of the war, until there was no possible alternative. It had lasted surprisingly well because she doled it out as scrupulously as any miser, but it had gone six months ago, and then she had dug up the box in the cellar, and slowly but surely that nest egg was diminishing, and she was nervous of exhausting it. She thought of selling a few acres of land, but the price was rock bottom, thousands upon thousands of acres of prime Southern farming land were on the market, and there were very few buyers. Besides, it was not her land to sell. It belonged to Jass. She couldn't understand why they had not heard from him. The wretched Henderson had made it back, all the way from Virginia, and Jass had been stationed in nearby Georgia when she last heard from him. But for several weeks there had been nothing, not a letter, not a message, not a word. They weren't even sure he was still alive, but no death notice had been delivered, and they could only assume that he was.

If only he would come home. If nothing else, he would solve the problem of Queen.

Since the time that she had first raised the subject, Sally had never again suggested that Queen leave; she thought the point had been well made. Nor did she want her to go until the war was over and they could start putting their lives back in order. Until Jass came home, they could not manage without Queen, but when he came home they would not need her.

Oh, perhaps for a little while, until they found someone else, or until one of the slaves came back. Sally, like many others, believed it was only a matter of time before several of the ex-slaves realized that life in a known environment was infinitely preferable to life in an alien and cruel world. She seldom went into town anymore-the road was too dangerous-but they had visitors from time to

time, and already she had heard the horror stories of the way blacks were behaving in this new South, and even worse stories of how some of them were being

treated. Looking for a scapegoat for their defeat, many of the returning veterans were venting their fury on blacks, in dead of night, and all the efforts of the policing Federal forces could not control them. And many of the blacks were vilely abusing their newfound status, treating any white with disdain or impudence, reveling in an orgy of excessive behavior and frequently abusing their former Massas and Missys, while the bodies of those last slain in war were not yet cold in the ground. It was inevitable, Sally thought. Like children in a candy store, they were starting to indulge what could be formidable and dangerous power. She feared for their potential and worried for their safety, and it didn't matter that many of the stories she heard were untrue or greatly exaggerated; she had no yardstick to judge the reality of the situation.

Jass would know, Jass would explain everything to her, Jass would-Yet we must not expect too much of him, she told herself. He will be as lost as we are. But he is a man, and he will know how to cope. If only he would come home.

For Lizzie, especially, the lack of him was unbearable, and yet it had to be borne. She had survived the war with as much grace as she could muster, which wasn't a lot, but now the war was over, and she longed for him. She was not foolish enough to imagine that he would make everything all right again-Hercules could hardly have improved their condition-but his place was with them, to be responsible for the welfare of his family again. He'd played at soldier long enough.

During the last few months of the war, her emotions had taken a helter-skelter ride of despair at their state, fear of the lawless gangs freely roaming the countryside, joy at the small Southern victories, and bitter acceptance of their defeat. She had been in Florence on the day that news of Lincoln's assassination reached them, taking young James to Elizabeth, and like many in the town, she had cheered heartily at the news. Then the occupying Federal troops had swept

among them, brutal and ruthless, announcing that the least demonstration of joy would result in the offender's home being burned, and any rejoicing by the townspeople would bring

about the destruction of the town. This had forcibly brought home to Lizzie the power that the Federals now enjoyed, and the new constraints that governed their lives. She lived in fear, not only of the outlaws but of the law itself. She simply didn't know how to behave in this strange world of Northern, military rule, and so she kept her mouth shut and her tail between her legs, and prayed for Jass's return.

Above everything else, and what was most astonishing to her, was how very much she missed him. The death of Easter had taken a great burden from her concept of their marriage. She doubted he would ever take another paramour, for Easter had been a special case, and now there were no slaves for him to choose from, or to go to for a single night. So he was hers at last, in a way he had never been before. She found that she wanted him, she \yanted to feel the weight of him beside her in her bed at night, and because she no longer had a rival to whom she was being constantly compared, she wanted to explore the physical side of her marriage with a greater enthusiasm than she had ever known. She lived in expectation of the smell of him, the touch of him, the feel of him, and she wanted to give him another baby, no matter how much it hurt, to prove how very much she loved him. If only he would come home.

Then the brat came into the room, and reminded her of so many things she would rather forget. She was the past, and soon she would be gone, like all the other slaves. Good riddance, thought Lizzie, who missed the service that the slaves provided, but was determined to show the world that she could manage without them. And, like Sally and so many others, she firmly believed that many of the ex-slaves would come running home soon enough, when they discovered what they had lost in return for this wretched freedom. When they did, they'd have to beg for a job as far as Lizzie was concerned. Like the brat, whom she simply 'Ignored.

Queen put down the coffee, and stood waiting, not for thanks, for she knew Gabriel's trumpet would come sooner, but for instruction. Her eyes scanned the room, checking on necessary repairs while she waited. But Sally and Lizzie had forgotten their cues, and Queen had to prompt them.

"Wonder what they want for dinner," she said to the fireplace.

Sally, who hadn't realized the purpose of Queen's attention, responded immediately, but not to Queen.

"I wonder what we should have for dinner tonight," she said to Lizzie.

Lizzie shrugged. Who knew what was in the pantry? She never went there, because she didn't want to have to speak to the brat. Or even see her.

"Oh, fried chicken," she dreamed. "I'd love some fried chicken; we haven't had it in so long. With potatoes, and a rich, creamy gravy-"

"She go out and catch me a chicken, I'll fry it," Queen snorted to a portrait on the wall.

"Be realistic, Lizzie," Sally said at the same time.

There was a tiny silence, while they waited for another prompt. Queen left them in suspense for a moment.

"I s'ppose I could make a vegetable stew," she said to the drapes.

Lizzie sighed. "I suppose we'll just have to make do with vegetable stew again," she said. "Again!"

Queen ignored the barb. They had only vegetables, and should be grateful for that. Occasionally, William or Isaac shot a rabbit, but even they were in short supply. There were too many hunters.

“We must count our blessings,” Sally said. “I’m sure it will be delicious.”

It was done, the charade had been played out one more time, and Queen humphed and left the room. The contrast of Queen’s physical presence with the pretense that she was not there had unsettled Lizzie. She put down her tapestry and looked about her at the shabby room that once had been so grand. If only Jass would come. He would solve all their problems. They would have some kind of income again, for Jass would find a way. And he would get rid of Queen. There was no place for her; she could no longer pretend to have a special bond of attachment to the family. She was a nigra, and nigras, who had some value before the war, were less than nothing now. With Queen gone, with all the slaves gone, they would have to start afresh. They would hire new staff, as and when they could afford it, and life would never be the same as it was before, but it would be something, and they would be happy.

She walked to the window and stared out, hoping to see him walking up the drive.

“If only he would come home,” she said softly.

Queen scraped and cut the vegetables, and put them in a pot of water to simmer. She’d already cleaned the bedrooms, made the beds, and changed the sheets. Tomorrow she would start on the weekly laundry, and then, if it was a good drying day, she’d scrub the hall floor. There wasn’t much more she could do today, but there would be light for at least another hour, so she went outside to hoe the weeds in the little vegetable garden that she tended, but she was sick of working.

She threw aside her hoe and walked to the slave graveyard to see her mammy instead. Weeds covered the grave and she bent to the task of clearing them, but she felt a little sick. Her time of the month was coming, and she prayed it would not be bad, as it sometimes was, because she had too much to do. Tiredness

flooded through her, and she lay on the ground beside the grave to rest. Not to sleep-she had no time for thatbut just to rest for a little while. She saw a line of ants crawling through the weeds, going to or from their nest, and dreaded to think that perhaps they burrowed into the ground and crawled over her dead mammy, and that made her sad because she knew her mammy wasn't there anymore, but gone, gone, food for worms. Tears trickled from her eyes, as much for herself and her present desperate loneliness, as for sweet Easter.

She had no one to talk to except Isaac and Davy, and they as field hands avoided her, a house nigger. Even William and Eleanor, when they were here, hardly acknowledged her, taught by their mammy and their gran'ma.

She had no one to share her troubles with, no one to ease her burden, no one to laugh with and play with, or even to sit with in companionable silence, knowing that they cared about her. All she had was people to shout at, who pretended that they never heard her.

It would be different when her pappy came home. Please, Mammy, make him come home.

"If we goin', reckon we should go," Davy said.

"Reckon we should," Isaac agreed.

Davy was surprised. They'd talked about it so much, and Davy guessed the truth of Isaac's reluctance to leave. He was waiting till the Massa came home, to see if it was all right to go, to get his permission to leave.

Old folk were like that; they clung to the old ways.

"Massa ain't never comin'," Isaac said. He wasn't so old, younger than the Massa, but it confirmed Davy's guess. "Reckon he's dead."

They sat in the clearing of the old empty slave quarters. It was a starry, cloudless night, and they'd built a little fire to keep the mosquitoes away. They'd eaten their portions of Queen's vegetable stew, saved some for breakfast, and they made the decision that they would leave the next day. They didn't have any money, but they'd manage somehow. Davy had heard a story that anyone who was prepared to work in or near the cesspits was well paid, and he was ready to do that. Not for long, of course, just till they had enough cash to get them to New Orleans. Or Somewhere. Or anywhere.

They sat in pleasant silence, each dreaming his separate dream and their bold new future. After an hour or so, Isaac spoke.

"Best git to bed," he said. "Best be up early, if we gwine go.

"Yeh," Davy nodded in agreement. After another long silence, they went to their separate beds, but Davy couldn't get to sleep for hours. They were going. At last, they were going. At last, he was going to be truly free.

Isaac woke him at dawn. They packed their few belongings and ate the vegetable stew left over from the previous night.

It was a lov ' ely morning, fragments of a gentle mist hovering in the air. Isaac looked around at the slave quarters, where he had lived all his life, and which he was not anxious to leave.

"Gwine miss this ol' place," he said.

Davy nodded, hoping he had not changed his mind.

"Gwine say goodbye to the ol' folk," Isaac said, and walked away, in the direction of the slave graveyard.

Queen was also awake early, and had put the old sheets in a big tub, to soak. She gathered three eggs from the few laying hens, enough for Miss Lizzie and Miss Sally if she scrambled

them and made a lot of toast. She put hickory acoms in the oven to roast, prepared the breakfast, and served it in the dining room. No one spoke to her. She went outside, scrubbed the sheets, rinsed them, and hung-them out to dry, then put the other clothes in to soak. She went back into the big house, got her dustpan and brush, and went upstairs to clean the rooms and make the beds.

So it was that she saw him first. Straightening the drapes, she glanced out of the window, and saw a tiny figure at the distant gateway. She knew it was him before she could see who it was.

Her heart fluttered, and tears spurted to her eyes. He had come home.

She went downstairs and into the sitting room. Miss Lizzie was working at her tapestry, and Miss Sally was trying to read a newspaper, a small magnifying glass to her eye.

“He’s comin’,” she said quietly. “The Massa’s comin’.”

For a moment it was as if she had not spoken, or they had not heard her.

But they could not ignore her now. Sally put down the paper and turned to stare at Queen.

Lizzie let out a little scream of joy. She threw down her needlework, and ran from the room. Sally pulled herself to her feet, using her cane as help, and followed more slowly.

Lizzie ran onto the veranda, and looked to the drive. She could see him walking up the hill to the house, and she wanted to fly into his arms and hold him to her and never let him go. But something in his manner stopped her. He looked downcast and proud and lost and found, and the empty sleeve hanging at his right side made her heart catch in her mouth. And then she saw those nigras going to talk to him, she never could remember their names.

She could not, must not, go to him, not now. She could almost sense the defeat in him, and the need for things to be as they were , although they never

could be. She composed herself, and straightened her hair and her dress, and waited for him as she would have waited for the returning hero.

Davy had begun to think that they would never leave the graveyard. Isaac had spent forever saying goodbye to all his dead relatives, and Davy thought he had seen tears in the

man's eyes. He sat under a tree, to wait until Isaac had finished whatever conversations he was having with these folk who couldn't hear, and, because he was tired, he drifted into a light sleep. The next thing he knew, Isaac was prodding him with his foot.

"Time to go," Isaac said, and Davy let out a whoop of joy. They walked down the hill, past the white cemetery, and toward the mansion.

"Ain't gwine say g'bye to 'em?" Davy had asked, worried that ol' Missy Sally would change Isaac's mind.

"Nope," said Isaac. "But I's leavin' by the front gate." They skirted the bottom of the hill on which the big house stood, and made for the drive, and saw the Massa coming home. Davy cursed his luck. Now they would never leave. Not surprisingly, Isaac walked straight to the Massa.

"Welcome home, Massa," he said. "We's glad you's come back safe."

"Isaac," Jass said warmly, and smiled. He looked at the younger man, but could not remember his name.

"Davy," Davy said. No one ever remembered his name.

"I'm surprised you're still here," Jass said. They were free and he doubted they had been paid. Or perhaps Sally had managed the money better than he had

thought.

“Mat’a fac’, Massa, we was jus’ leavin’,” Davy said, to forestall Isaac.

Jass stared sadly at the empty cotton fields, and nodded his head.

Isaac felt the need to explain. “Thing is, young Davy ain’t ever been off the plantation. Wants to see the world.”

Jass nodded again, but did not look at them. “Well, good luck,” he said, as if he understood. “If you change your minds, I guess I’ll need a couple of hands here.” He smiled again, ruefully. “I don’t expect I’d be able to pay very much. But something.”

“Thank you, Massa,” Isaac said. They stood’in silence for a moment, not knowing how to end it, not knowing how to say goodbye.

Jass nodded, and moved on toward the house.

“Good luck to you, Massa,” Isaac called after him. Jass did not look back, and Davy could hardly believe his good fortune.

“it true!” he cried softly. “We’s free! Massa didn’t even try an’ stop us!”

“Hush yo mouth,” Isaac snapped. He never took his eyes off Jass, but watched the sad, lonely man walk on up to the big house. It was a hard homecoming for him, Isaac thought.

Sally was standing beside Lizzie on the veranda, and Queen was a little distance away, mindful of her dubious place. Like Lizzie, Sally wanted to run to him and take him in her arms, and hold him and love him and soothe the hurt from him, but, like Lizzie, some evident pain in his manner stopped her. The empty sleeve at his side caused her mother’s soul to cry, but she would not allow the tears to

flow.

Jass stopped, a little way from the house. He looked at the women, and tried to smile, but could not find sufficient joy in him even to do that.

He could have been back days ago, two weeks ago, but he could not come home to nothing, with nothing. Jass took a resonating pride in his war record, in his achievements as a soldier; he had fought hard and well, but the surrender proved that he had not fought hard enough, and now he had to face-the consequences of his failure. He had seen the devastation in Georgia, caused by Sherman's army on its march to the sea, and although he knew that his property would not be so desolate, he knew it would be bad enough. Any soldier who had fought for the Confederate cause knew that of his home. They talked about it among themselves, each sharing the other's gloom. Unless they had gold hidden away somewhere, they had nothing, except land. Jass was rich in that, but the land was worth nothing, like his Confederate bonds and his Confederate dollars and his Confederate bank account, and so he was poor, dirt poor, war poor, Confederate poor, like a thousand and a thousand and a thousand others, He had tried to come back with something, but no one had anything to give. On his long walk home he had visited every friend, every acquaintance, calling in all his favors, in the hope of some scrap of promise for the future, but promises were all he had, and distant ones.

Of immediate help, cash help, practical help, he had nothing. He had stopped in Florence the previous night, with Elizabeth, and comforted her for the death of Tom, and loved his children, and heard of the sorry state

of affairs at The Forks of Cypress. This morning he had walked from Florence to the plantation, and saw that everything he had heard, everything he had guessed, everything he had feared, was true.

He stared at his mother, and at the empty, silent, bankrupt fields.

Everything he had inherited, everything that had been in his governance,

everything that his father had charged him to protect, was reduced to nothing.

It broke his heart.

“Mother,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I am so very sorry.”

Sally knew that it had to be said, knew that he had to say it, but she was never prouder of him than at that moment. Her son was brave. He had fought and fought well, and would, she knew, have given his life for them. But her son was more than brave. Her son was honest.

She moved to him slowly, love for him and pride in him battling in her heart for dominance. The evidence of his bravery, that awful empty sleeve, caused in her emotions she had not felt since he was bom, and was whole and complete and healthy, and she loved him for it. Now he was not whole, he was not complete, but he was alive, and she loved him all the more.

“Oh, Jass, my darling son,” she said, like a secret between them. “It’s wonderful to see you.”

She took her wounded child into her arms, and held him as a mother should, to keep him safe from life’s storms. He clove to her. The very smell of her that had so sealed itself in his memory on the day he had gone away to war broke open all the other memories of his love for her, and swept aside the bitter remembrances of war, if only for this moment.

He did not weep, because he was home, and safe, and there was no need to cry.

Lizzie, aware of some powerful, visceral emotion between them that she was not privy to, moved forward slowly, and now Jass saw her, his wife and love, and he included her in his embrace with his mother. They stood together, the three of them, and spoke not a word, and moved not at all, until each was sure, in their heart, that he would never go away again.

Then Lizzie laughed through her tears.

“Oh, come inside,” she said. “You need looking after.” He moved with them to the veranda, to the house, to the open door.

He did not even see Queen, standing on the veranda, waiting so patiently for a word, a look, something, anything, that might acknowledge her existence. But there was nothing. Jass, still locked in Lizzie and Sally’s loving embrace, moved past her into the house.

As if she wasn’t there.

It was a shattering moment for Queen. She stood stock-still, waiting for him to come back and include her in his embrace, but knew he would not.

She did not exist to him. She wasn’t there. She was nothing, worse than nothing.

She bit her lip, hard, determined not to cry, but not knowing how to avoid it. She felt the salt taste of blood, her blood in her mouth, and knew she was trembling. She had to get away, and moved from the veranda, across the lawn, somewhere, anywhere; she had no direction or purpose, she only had to get away.

She stopped at the edge of the lawn, and looked down at the drive. Isaac was moving slowly to the gate, trying to keep pace with the whooping Davy.

Davy, looking back at Isaac, saw Queen alone on the little hill, and called out to her.

“Come along with us, Miss Queen,” he yelled, wanting to gather the world into his joy. Isaac looked back and saw her, and seemed to understand.

“Ain’t nuttin’ for yo’ here,” he cried.

She should, she knew, go with them, because Isaac was right, there was nothing for her here, not even a father’s love. She wanted to call out to them to wait for her, to run down to them, careless of clothes or baggage, to be with people who might have liked her, or at least admitted she existed, off together to

a bold bright somewhere.

But she could not. This was her place. These people, even if they did not acknowledge it, were her family. The Massa was her pappy, and she would make him love her. She convinced herself, in that moment, that they needed her at least as much as she needed them. She tried to smile, but could not.

She gave a little wave to Isaac and Davy, and Davy called something that she couldn't hear, but that might have been goodbye, then danced away.

Isaac, after another glance at Queen, followed him more slowly.

Queen watched them until they were gone from the gate and gone from her life, taking her last opportunity of freedom with them. She turned back and looked at the house. Through the open window she could see Jass, the Massa, her pappy, the returning hero, sitting with his family. His white family.

Well, he would be hungry soon, after his long walk, so she had better go to the kitchen and make him something to eat.

She walked away, to the back of the house.

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lass spoke to Queen later, in the kitchen when she was cooking. She'd killed a broody hen to make a little celebration dinner for his return, and occupied herself with jointing the bird while he talked, so that he might understand her determination to go on as before, that she expected no special treatment from him, which, of course, she did. He was kind to her and clearly relieved by her domesticity, and her apparent refusal to ask for more than he could give.

Queen had hardly occupied his mind for the last several months, for her place within the structure of his household was special only to her. When he thought of his family, it was of Lizzie and his children by her, of his mother, and then, by extension and lessening concern, of Elizabeth Kirkman and her family, and on through the great network of his white relations. He was fond of Queen, fonder of her than of any other of his former slaves, for she was Easter's child, and a living fragment of the memory of his love. That she was also his own child was a lesser issue, and one of lessening importance to him. Although the war had been over only for a few weeks, his discussions with his friends and associates had con-

centrated all his attention on the survival of his immediate and legal family in the postwar years.

As foreseen by Sally some time earlier, and Parson Dick before that, white Southern society was already closing in on itself, as protection against the new occupying armies of the North, military or civilian, and that other army of countless numbers of freed slaves, who represented a considerable threat to life as it had been and the life that any of them saw as a viable future. Queen was part of the past. In that past she had a clearly defined role, a child of the plantation, her place understood by the entire society. In this new world, these children were dangerous, less so in the case of girls, but profoundly so in the case of boys, who, if they were given legal standing, might expect some portion of their true parent's, estate. Thus the fragile white Southern inheritance might be diluted to a point when those of Negro blood had dominance over great estates. Since this was unthinkable, these children, boys and girls, had to be excluded. This exclusion did not prohibit gentle treatment of them, or even affection for them, but the gentler the treatment and the larger the affection, the more claim they might have to recognition.

Intuitively, every Southerner understood this, and each was going to considerable and sometimes brutal lengths to achieve a dispossession of those who had once been admitted, if not nurtured.

Jass had talked with Sally, and she had told him of Queen's resistance to the idea that she should leave. In this, Jass sided with Queen. She was of his blood, however perversely, and he could not bear to make her an outcast. So he came to her, and treated her as a valuable member of his staff. He thanked her for her hard work, and told her of his gratitude.

… Tain't nuttin',” Queen shrugged.

“Yes, it is,” Jass said. “I don't think my family could have managed without you.”

He deliberately said “my family,” instead of “our family,” as part of the process of exclusion. Queen guessed this, but chose to ignore it as a slip of the tongue.

“It's my job, Massa,” Queen shrugged.

He smiled. “You don't have to call me 'Massa' now,” he said.

But what else could she call him?

“And there's something else,” he continued. “I can't afford to pay you very much. Something, but not much. But then when things pick up-”

Queen was shocked. She was being relegated to a staff position. If he paid her, he could dismiss her whenever he chose. That he could have chosen not to pay her, but to send her on her way, did not occur to her.

“I don't want your money,” she muttered.

Jass smiled again. “I have to pay you something,” he said. “Slavery's illegal now.”

He left the room. He had hardly asked after her welfare, had not discussed his

own. He had taken on a cookhousekeeper at miserable wages, and had, neatly and effectively, boxed her into a hole from which it would be difficult for her to escape. Queen slumped on a chair at the table, and hid her head in her hands.

"Slavery's illegal, but family ain't," she whispered to God. "And I's family."

And God was kind to her, just for a moment, and sent a tiny ray of hope into her heart. At least he hadn't dismissed her. At least he hadn't told her she must leave, as Miss Sally had. He was letting her stay, and by doing so, he had left open the door of her confining box. Times were difficult for him, but when they got better he would see the error of his ways, and elevate her, if only a little, from her lowly station. In the meantime, she would put on a cheerful face, and make him realize what she meant to him.

She smelled something burning. The potatoes had boiled dry. She jumped up, snatched the pan from the stove, venting her frustration in energy.

Her hopes never came true. Slowly, very slowly, inch by inch, day by day, the circumstances of the family improved, although they never regained anything of their former fortune. Ja5s sold some small parQuIs of land, and put other acreage out for rent. Encouraged by friends, he allowed them to put his name forward as a candidate for the state legislature, and was elected senator. His reimbursement was not large, and he was required to spend a great deal of time in Montgomery, but at least he had an income, which was more than many of

his friends had, and a job that gave him the opportunity to be of some value to his constituency. He brought the children back from Florence, believing that they belonged at The Forks, at their home, no matter how difficult their daily travel to school might be. It was as well that he did so, for Elizabeth, his half sister, died soon afterward., She had never ceased mourning for Tom, and preferred to be with him in some kind of peace, no matter how ethereal, rather than face the difficulties of the world in which they now lived.

Sally wept for her daughter's death, for she would miss her, but she was no stranger to death; indeed she almost seemed to welcome the concept of it for herself. She spent days poring over the obituaries as published in the skimpy daily newspaper, and attended whatever funerals she could. With the small improvement in her diet, her eyesight seemed to get better, or perhaps it was because the war was over, and Jass was home, and, with the end of slavery, a great burden of responsibility had been taken from her.

Almost for the first time in her life, Sally had time for herself.

Lizzie positively flowered. Since there was no longer any point in trying to be a Southern belle, and she was getting a little old for it, she no longer tried. There were few opportunities for glittering social occasions, as in the old days, for no one could afford them and had little to celebrate other than sheer survival. She channeled her formidable energy into the management of her house and the care of family. And her love for Jass. Or her gratitude to him. He had come home when so many had not, and Lizzie could not bear the idea of life as a widow. Although efficient and capable in her own right, she was a woman who believed she needed a husband to enable her to function at her best. Jass was surprised by the change in her, especially when he took her to bed and she welcomed him into her, and gave every indication that the experience, far from being unpleasant to her, as latterly, gave her pleasure. If Jass had been a suspicious man, he might have thought that she had taken a lover in his absence, but he no longer tried to rationajize or examine what was, or what might have been. He dedicated his energy to a better present.

Lizzie even came to an uneasy understanding with Queen, or at least recognized her existence. Now that Queen had an official position within the household, as paid staff member, some edge of anxiety was removed from Lizzie. But she was a tough, relentless mistress, and was not shy of demanding

longer hours and harder work from her servant, if that was possible. She still harbored resentment of her, and perhaps hoped that if the job was made unbearable, Queen would leave of her own volition.

But Queen would not go, nor could she think of any reason why she should. If she was grumpy to others, she always presented to Jass a sunshine face, and hid from him any hurt or resentment that she felt. When told that Lizzie was pregnant again, she smiled, and congratulated her Massa, although privately, in her room, she wept. Jass didn't need any more children. He did not fully appreciate one that he already had.

Thus her life became less than it had been when she was a slave. Then, she had been able to persuade herself that she occupied some special place within her Massa's heart and house.

Now she was simply a drudge.

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Alec Henderson was doing rather better than most. When he arrived back at The Forks of Cypress after his long trek home, he was greeted with surprising warmth by Letitia, and cordially by Sally and Lizzie. As soon as politeness would allow, he went to his cottage alone, and, to his relief, found that his cache of gold had not been disturbed.

He chuckled, and laughed, and hopped an unlikely jig in the empty room. He was rich. Not really rich in the way that landed gentry had been, but compared to almost anyone else in the district, he was a man of fiscal means. He had a meager

dinner at the big house where Letitia was now living, and explained to them something of his plans. Obviously, there was no place for him at The Forks. Without slaves, they had no need of an overseer, and could not afford one anyway. He planned to take Letitia away for a holiday to Charleston, to see her family and discover their postwar circumstances.

He had not told his wife of this, and she gave a little shriek of joy- , When he took her to bed that night, he made love to her with a vigor and passion that sur

.prised her, and she responded with an enthusiasm that intrigued him. Letitia supposed he had taken other women, whores probably, while he was away at the war and it did not bother her. It was a man's prerogative, and soldiers did that sort of thing. But she would not tolerate that sort of behavior now he was home, and the best way to keep a man happy was to let him know he was needed and appreciated. She entered into their lovemaking with energy, although tempered with a missionary correctness. She had found no outlet for her own physical needs while he was away, and was surprised to discover that she had desires for him. She caressed him afterward, and they discussed their future.

Henderson thought they would do well with a little farm, for life on the land was all he knew, but Letitia had other ambitions. They could not afford a large holding, nor the hands for a cotton crop, and she had no intention of being married to a tobacco farmer.

She wanted to own a small store, a place of general provisions, and he could maintain his association with the land, and get the produce they sold at bargain prices. She was a shopgirl at heart, and they would do well, because they would give credit to reliable customers.

Henderson was appalled. Credit was a fool's game. They could never be sure of being repaid.

"No," said Letitia. "It is the way of the future. No one has any money now, so they will flock to us, and we will extend ourselves. But things will get better, because they cannot possibly get any worse. Money will be made, and it will be owed to us, so gentlefolk will be bound to us by what they owe, and will continue to shop with us, if only out of embarrassment or gratitude."

Henderson continued to argue, but his was a hopeless cause. Letitia had her mind set on a particular way of doing business, and she was a formidable opponent. She never asked him where he got the money to fund their new enterprise, and she never told her husband of the joy it would give her when those who had previously shunned her, or sneered at her, were forced to come begging for her largess.

They spent a pleasant three weeks in Charleston, and Letitia, who had no fondness for her ungrateful family, gloried in the dire circumstances of her relatives. Her father was dead, killed by drink, and her mother was reduced to taking in paying guests of the lower white classes. Her brother had never volunteered to fight, but had taken the coward's way, run the blockade and gone to sea on Yankee merchant ships. Her sisters were both widowed by the war, and one lived in the attic of her mother's house, while the other had fallen considerably from grace, and received gentleman callers who paid for the privilege. All this misfortune nourished 'Letitia's moral rectitude, and as the weather got hotter she was content to travel back to Alabama with her husband and look for a suitable shop to buy, secure in the knowledge that she, alone of her family, had a good husband, prospects, and a Christian conscience.

They found a suitable building some two miles from The Forks of Cypress, on the southern side, away from Florence. It was ideal. Folk who did not wish to make the arduous and often dangerous journey to town could now come to them. Including, perhaps, the high and mighty Jacksons. Letitia had no love for her former employers, who were not ardently religious and espoused some liberal ideas. Even though she had sought sanctuary in the big house during the war, it was from loneliness, she told herself now, not from fear, and both Sally and Lizzie had treated her with some disdain, constantly, tacitly reminding her that she was present only as a favor. Nor could she imagine how they could let that bastard mulatta girl, living proof of the Massa's immorality, share the same roof and prepare their food.

Henderson went about the countryside, renewing old acquaintances and offering to buy their harvests for minimal rec-

ompense. The exigencies of the time gave him several reliable suppliers.

Letitia employed two nigras to paint and clean the old wooden building.

She had a counter made, and shelves, purchased a fine set of brass scales, and, aproned and capped in clean, neat gingham, opened her shop for business.

They did well, but not well enough to expand the store or staff, for they gave credit freely, and bit quite heavily into Henderson's savings. He had fretted about this for some time, but when the first repayment was made on a debt, he relaxed, for at last he could see some potential for return on his outlay. And his was a pleasant life. Letitia required nothing of him but that he keep her shelves stocked, and so he spent his days riding round the country, chewing the fat with friends, and his evenings in the company of likeminded whites, reminiscing about the war, and planning vengeance on Yankees and uppity niggers. Gradually, the store became a meeting place for those young white males who responded to Henderson's genial authority and who believed that the South would rise again in glory, and the niggers be sent back to hell, where they belonged.

Letitia's life was at least as pleasant, monarch of her small domain, and she had a taste of triumph within a week of the store's opening. Jass had come to her, asking for credit to buy food. He was not shy or diffident about it, although it was anathema to him, but Letitia sensed his distaste for the business and for her, and dragged it out as long as possible, extracting every ounce of pleasure from it that she could.

Jass was scrupulous in his dealings with her. Whenever a little money came his way, he would pay something from his bill, although every visit to the bombastic proprietress repelled him. He went himself only when he had money in his pocket. Otherwise, he sent Queen.

Queen hated going to the store. She hated asking for credit, and she and Mrs. Henderson conducted their business with mutual loathing. More than anything, Queen hated the white men who were always hanging around outside the shop, lounging, loafing, threatening. On her first visits, with Jass, they had ignored her, although clearly appreciative of her prettiness. One crisp fall day, Jass was in Montgomery, and Queen had

gone on her own. Three of these rednecked men were inside the shop, seated, or squatting against the wall, by the small potbelly stove in the comer. Mr. Henderson was with them, and while Queen shopped she was aware of their silent concentration on her. She had to pass close by one young man, dirty and unshaven, to inspect a bag of dried beans, and he did not move his feet out of the way, but leered at her.

"Nice day for it, lady," he said, but it was not pleasant, and Henderson chuckled.

"Don't bother with her," he told his companions. "She's high yalla."

Queen blushed, and the men whistled.

"Could have fooled me," one said. "Don't matter a damn," said another.

"I don't mind a little midnight velvet."

They laughed, and stared at Queen, and she changed her mind about the beans, and moved closer to the counter and the comparative security of Mrs. Henderson's presence.

After that, it was always the same. Whether the men were inside or out, they never directly threatened her, hardly spoke to her, but would stare at her as she walked by, and whistle, or snicker, and whisper what they would do to her if they ever found her alone on some dark night. She complained to Jass, but he said there was nothing he could do, and he was sure the men meant her no real

harm. She was protected by the law. She tried to avoid going, but no one else would, and it was her duty. Every visit to the store became an ordeal, and she would stop her horse some little distance from the shop, and steel herself for the coming encounter.

The following summer came early, hot days in May that drained all energy.

Lizzie was listless, for she was nearly at term, and Sally had taken to her bed with an unseasonable chill, brought on by the sharp change in the weather. Jass had to go into Florence, on state business, and Queen wanted to go with him to shop, but he told her not to be silly. They didn't need much, and he couldn't get credit in town. Queen put off going to the store for as long as she could, until it was late in the day. She might have found reasons not to go at all, until Lizzie demanded fresh tomatoes for a salad, and their own were not yet ripe.

Queen rode down to the store toward sunset. As usual, half a dozen young men were outside with Henderson, and, as usual they leered at her, but let her pass by unmolested. She gave her short list to Mrs. Henderson, and watched carefully as the tomatoes were being weighed, because she had been cheated before.

"Sure don't look like two pound to me," she murmured, half to herself, but loudly enough for Mrs. Henderson to hear.

"Are you saying my scales are faulty?" the aggrieved shopkeeper demanded.

Queen shrugged. A couple of the young men had wandered into the store, aimless, bored.

"You've lost none of your cheek, I see," Mrs. Henderson continued. "Ken your place, girl. I suppose you want this on credit?"

“Massa Jackson’s good for it, he pays his bills,” Queen retorted, ill temper simmering. “And your prices high enough.”

It was more than she meant to say, but it was enough to provoke Mrs.

Henderson, who eyed her carefully.

“Are you sassing me?” she began, and overrode Queen’s protestations.

“You’re accusing me of overcharging you, in front of witnesses.”

She nodded at the young men, who moved closer to enjoy the fun.

“Credit doesn’t come free, you know,” Mrs. Henderson announced righteously.

“And if the high-and-mighty Mr. Jackson has any complaints about the arrangement, tell him to come and see me himself”

She paused for a moment, but only for a moment.

“Not send his bastard slave girl.”

The young men laughed and muttered agreement. Queen turned on Mrs.

Henderson in fury.

“I ain’t a slave no more,” she cried, but Mrs. Henderson was in exquisite control. She had been wanting to do this for years.

“You’re a useless nigra, with no civil tongue in your head for decent white folk,” she snapped.

“in the old days she’d a been whipped,” one of the young men agreed.

“That’s what she needs now,” his companion said, advancing on Queen.

“A good spanking, yeh, tan her little nigra tail,” chimed the first.

It was as much sport as anything; it was doubtful they would have harmed her here, in public, but they frightened Queen, and she saw no escape but retreat.

“You cain’t touch me,” she cried, backing out of the door.

The young men followed, calling after her. “Come here, girl-teach you some manners!”

But Queen was gone, out of the store, running to her horse tethered nearby. The men outside were puzzled at first, until their companions appeared, calling to Queen, announcing the dispute. Now they all ran to Queen, jeering at her. One reached her as she mounted her horse and tried to pull her down, but she hit him, hard, across the face, with her stock.

At that moment, it changed from a game to a deadly chase.

The man Queen had hit fell back, hand to a bloody gash on his cheek.

“Slut!” he cried. His friends caught him, and ran to their own horses.

Already it was past sunset, and a couple had the foresight to grab burning brands that had been lighted outside the store.

Queen spurred her horse and galloped away as fast as she dared, but she was not a natural rider, and the very speed of the horse frightened her.

She dared not took back, because she could hear the sound of the men in pursuit of her, the pounding of the horses, and their laughing, angry cries of “whore” and 11nigger slut,” and the loudest voice was Henderson’s. The road stretched straight for a clear mile before her, and she knew she could never outride them. Her best hope was to hide or to lose them, and she turned off the road and into the dense wood.

But her pursuers were men of the land, hunting men, and it made little difference to - them if their quarry was a frightened animal or a black human being. They tracked her effortlessly into the forest. Queen could not ride fast

because of the tan gled bushes, and she was scared that her horse would stumble.

As she twisted and turned her way through the trees, she could see the flames of their burning brands, dancing, it seemed, all around her, closer and closer, dazzling her, and all she could hear was their taunting voices.

Her horse caught its foot on a broken log and fell, pitching Queen to the ground. Winded and bruised, bleeding from some small cuts caused by brambles, and blind with panic, she scrabbled through the undergrowth, searching for some tree to hide behind. The gloaming was her friend, and, unable to see where she was going, she slid on some rocks and pitched forward into a narrow ditch.

Almost immediately, the men were upon her, sweeping their brands through the air in search of her, the flames almost inches from her face. They milled around, unable to track her in the twilight.

“Cain’t see her,” called one, the fire he carried glittering in Queen’s eyes. There was a silence, broken only by the sounds of coming night in the forest, and of her horse crashing through branches.

“Ain’t too far, there’s her hoss,” cried another, and the hooves of his horse knocked some stones down into the ditch, hitting Queen’s face. He spurred away and into the night.

Gradually, the sound of them receded.

“I ain’t, giving up,” she heard another shout, but farther away from her, moving away, and she began to feel that she might be safe, for the moment at least, but cowered in the muddy ditch, lest they should return.

She fainted from shock and fear and relief, and when she came to it was night, with only a silver moon to guide her way. Her senses strained for sounds or sight

with only a silver moon to guide her way. Her senses strained for sounds or sight or feeling of the presence of the chasers, but there were none, although the noises of the forest startled and unsettled her. She lay clutching herself until she was sure they were gone, and crawled slowly from the ditch.

Although she knew she could not be more than a few miles from The Forks, she had no idea of where she was, and no sense of direction to guide her.

She walked forward, believing that she must eventually arrive somewhere, but as she struggled on, brambles snatching at her hair, screech owls startling her, moss causing her to slip from time to time, despair settled on her.

She was hopelessly lost.

She thought of curling down somewhere, under a tree, to

rest until dawn, for she knew she would not sleep, but the woods were alien to her, and almost as frightening as her pursuers, so she trudged on, crying a little, whispering to God to bring her to some safe place.

After she had walked for perhaps a mile, she saw a light among the trees, small flames, and stopped in fear, thinking it to be the brands of her tormentors. She held her breath and stared at the fire, wondering where she could hide, or if darkness was cloak enough, and then she realized that the flames were constant and unmoving, and brighter than any torch.

Cautiously, carefully, she edged forward, trying not to make a sound. As she came closer, she saw it was a campsite, and shivered, for perhaps the men had settled there to wait for her, or dawn. She was exhausted and hungry, and every bone in her body ached, and suddenly she no longer cared what happened to her. She moved a little closer, and saw that the men sitting round the camp fire were not white.

The color of their skin gave her a small sense of security, and she took a few more steps toward them, wondering how to approach them. A twig snapped under her foot and solved her problem, for they heard it, and stood to see what was happening.

“Who dat dere?” a man’s voice called.

The familiar slave dialect reassured her, and now she came out of the sheltering trees, and closer to the men.

“Help me, I’s lost,” she called to them softly, and came closer still, until her face was illumined by the flickering firelight.

“It dat house nigger,” another said in surprise.

Three ex-slaves from The Forks of Cypress had made this little clearing their home, preferring this freedom of the forest to their previous bondage or any future dealings with the white man’s world. Having been here for some months, they had started to regard the place as their home, and had cleared a large area. They had erected lean-to shelters from branches and twigs, lived off the land that was generous to them. They sometimes imagined that they would build a more permanent dwelling, and, if no one troubled them or claimed the land, they might begin some small farming.

They had no affection for a light-skinned mulatta who had

lived in the big house, had never given them the time of day, and might very well be a spy for their previous Massa, who owned this land, with whom she was always close.

“Help me, please,” she said again.

One man grabbed a branch, and held it up, threateningly.

“Get outa here, yalla bitch,” he shouted.

Queen had no energy to scream. Any small hope that had been kindled in her heart was extinguished. Not even blacks would assist her. She turned to leave, and then turned back again, to ask them at least to tell her in which direction to go, but as she did so, a light-skinned woman came out of a leanto.

” Leave her be,” she called to the men. She walked to the fire. “Come here, girl,” she said to Queen.

The woman, Pearl, had some authority over the two men she lived with, for each wanted her, and neither was prepared to offend her. They moved back a little, to allow Queen to walk to the fire.

Queen stared at Pearl, looking for some trace of sympathy, but the woman’s expression was’impassive. Still, she was a woman, and had averted immediate danger. She might understand.

“Some white men chased me!” Suddenly the whole story came blurting out, and Queen was close to tears. “I fell off my horse, and got hurt. They wanted to-wanted-”

She couldn’t finish. Pearl’s unrelenting stare unnerved her. She looked at the moon, raised her arms in supplication, and dropped them to her side again. The men were hostile, and the woman would not help. It all seemed useless.

Still Pearl did not speak, as if deliberating what she would do. Then she glanced at the pot of possum stew, simmering over the campfire.

“Is yo’ hungry?” she asked.

Jass was worried, and Lizzie, heavy with child, was angry. Queen had not come home from the store; there was no sign of her, no word from her. The children were hungry and Lizzie and Sally made them something to eat. Then Jass came home from Florence, and Lizzie told him that Queen had run away.

Jass didn’t believe it. After he had heard the full story from

Lizzie, he rode down to the Henderson store, and they denied any knowledge.of Queen’s whereabouts. She had been to the store, and then had ridden away in the company of a couple of the lads whose company she was fond of. Jass didn’t believe that, either. He knew of Queen’s dislike of the store and her fear of the

believe that, either. He knew of Queen's dislike of the store and her fear of the men who frequented it, and she would not have gone willingly away with any of them. He rode home looking for some sign of her, but it was dark, and he found nothing.

Lizzie sided with the Hendersons. Surely Queen had run away, like so many other slaves. And it was such a relief. All her married life there had been a barrier between herself and Jass. It had hurt her desperately when he went off to Easter at night, leaving Lizzie to pine for him. It had hurt her more when Jass brought the brat child to live in the big house, to have her nearer to him, and to flaunt his love for Easter in her face. Even after Easter had died, the hurt remained. She wished no harm to Queen, she hoped she wasn't hurt, but she had to believe that Queen was gone for good.

Because every time she looked at Queen, it reminded her of Easter, and reminded her that her husband had loved another woman more than her. A nigra.

She was angry with Queen for giving no indication of her intentions, and Jass for worrying about her; she banged pots on the stove as she prepared some food, and prayed that she would never have to see Queen again.

She went out to the veranda to tell Jass his meal was ready, and he nodded, and said he'd be in directly.

"Are you going to sit here all night?" Lizzie asked him. Jass turned to look at her, and Lizzie hated what she saw in his eyes.

"Well, it's on the table when you're ready," she snapped. "Don't blame me if it gets cold."

She went into the house and called Sally to the table. They ate their meal in silence. Sally, like Lizzie, was sure that Queen had run away, and it hurt her that the child had not said goodbye, but she could hardly blame her.

Jass stared at the moon, convinced that some mischief had befallen Queen, but not knowing what to do, or how to begin to find her. In the silence that surrounded him, he heard a sound that was not of the night. It was the clinking of a horse's bridle.

Queen's horse came trotting up the drive to him. Jass went to the animal and held it, felt it for injury, and then looked to the stars.

He took the horse to the stable to give it feed.

Queen ate her fill of the simple stew, and sat staring at the campfire.

The black men were still hostile to her. "She ain't stayin'," one said, and Pearl turned on him.

"She a po' nigger, like us, an' she tired an' scared," she said. "We look after her, like we would any nigger."

The men lapsed into aggressive silence, and Pearl put her arm around Queen.

"Is yo' tired?" she asked, and Queen nodded, suddenly desperately, achingly tired.

Pearl fetched a blanket from a lean-to, and wrapped it around Queen. "Lie down here by the fire," she ordered, and Queen did as she was bidden.

"Keep yo' warm," Pearl said, 11 give yo' light to see. Yo' is safe now.

Yo' with yo' own nigger folk now."

Queen tightened the blanket around her, and stared at the flames of the fire.

"She ain't stayin'," she heard one of the men say. "Fust light, she leavin'."

Pearl ignored him, and started to sing a soft lullaby. The flames of the fire danced in Queen's eyes. She wasn't wanted here, and would not stay.

This was not-her place. These were not her people.

But neither was The Forks of Cypress. She did not fit into this world or that.

She stared at the flames, and in her mind they became threatening.

She thought she could see the buming brands of her pursuers, and those flames would haunt her for the rest of her life.

There was only the night. And the fire. And the soft, sweet lullaby.

66

lass was up at first light. He took some bread and cheese from the kitchen, saddled a horse, and went looking for Queen. He intended to ask at every house in the district, search every barn if need be, but his first call was to the Hendersons. They had not told him all they knew, he was sure. As he rode, he contemplated offering a small reward for information as to her whereabouts, but wondered if that was fair to her. If she had run away, which he did not for one moment believe, then perhaps she would not want to be found.

He cursed himself for a blind, selfish fool. Lizzie had been angry with him all the previous evening, had hardly spoken to him until they went to bed, and when he tried to caress her, she turned away from him. He'd provoked her to tell him what was wrong, and then all of her frustrations came tumbling out. Jass was astonished, and bitterly regretful. He had never realized how deeply his relationship with Easter had hurt Lizzie, and how much she resented Queen's presence in the big house. He had thought that Lizzie approved of Easter, because her presence reduced his sexual need for his wife, who had not seemed to welcome their lovernaking. In that sense he was right, but now he understood that it was not the physical side of his relationship with Easter that infuriated Lizzie, it was the love.

"She made you smile, she made you laugh, she made you happy, in a way that I never could," Lizzie had told him through her tears. And it was true.

" But you are my wife," he told Lizzie, "and I love you."

"More than you loved her?" Lizzie asked, and all he could say was that it was different.

He should not have brought Queen into the big house; he should have known that just looking at the child was a slap 572

that just looking at the child was a slap 572

in the face to Lizzie, for Queen was the embodiment of Easter.

“Easter was just a slave,” Jass insisted. “A nigra-”

“Yes!” Lizzie cried. “And you loved her.” And it was true.

“I couldn’t ignore the child,” he insisted again.

“But did you have to love her?” Lizzie cried again. And it was true.

He did love Queen, but not as he loved his children by Lizzie; they were different, flesh of his formal union with his legal wife, his heirs, his darlings. Queen was an enchantment, a toy, a plaything, a little innocent doll that he had created, who gave him pleasure.

“And what about my pleasure?” Lizzie asked him, quietly now, for her crying was done. “Did you ever consider that?”

And it was true. He had not considered her. He had been a good husband and provider, and he had done his duty by their marriage. But he had never considered Lizzie’s feelings, she who should have had tirst demand on him.

“I’ll make it up to you somehow, Lizzie, I swear,” he promised her, caressing her swollen stomach.

“But you will not forget Queen,” she said. And it was true.

He would tind her and he would bring her home, if she wanted to come home, and he had no idea what arrangements he would make for their future so that all could be happy, but although he would respect Lizzie’s feelings and be more attentive to her, he would not dismiss Queen.

Queen woke at dawn, bitten by mosquitoes and stiff and sore. The men would not speak to her, but Pearl made her something to eat, and told her how to get back to The Forks, but reluctantly.

“Ain’t nuttin’ to’ yo’ there,” she said.

Queen shrugged, not knowing what to say. She walked north through the woods, as Pearl had told her, and two hours later she broke through the trees, and saw the familiar road home. Dirty and disheveled, burrs sticking in her hair, she limped to The Forks, turned in at the gate, and made her way up the drive. She walked to the back of the house and went into the kitchen.

Lizzie was cooking. She heard the door open and saw

Queen come in. Her heart sank. She had convinced herself that she had seen the last of Queen, that the girl had run away, like the brat nigra she was, and would never come back. Yet she was back, and Lizzie, after her argument with Jass the previous night, could not imagine how she would cope.

“Where have you been?” she said, evenly.

Queen walked to a chair at the table and sat down. “I sorry, Missy,” she said. “I had some trouble.”

“And are you aware of how much trouble you’ve caused here?” Lizzie asked her.

Queen hardly expected words of comfort or solace from Lizzie, but she had not expected anger.

“No thought for us, no word of warning,” Lizzie said. “Just off and away, like the no-account nigra you are. In the old days we’d have set the dogs after you. Get yourself cleaned up and get to work.”

Fireworks of anger were starting to explode in Queen’s mind.

“I sorry, I— she began, but Lizzie’s temper broke before hers. “Your Massa’s been out since dawn looking for you, Miss Sally unable to sleep, and me in my condition-”

Queen could not stand it anymore. They’d treat an old dog better than they treated her. She rose to her feet in fury.

” He not my Massa, ” she said. ” He my pappy!

Lizzie slapped her face hard.

“How dare you say that! How dare you speak to me like that! “

But Queen dared. She would dare anything now, for she had nothing to lose.

“An’ how dare you,” she cried. “I ain’t some animal for you to push around, Queen do this, Queen do that, cook, wash, clean, garden, plant cotton, pick cotton, morning till night, and never a word of thanks! You don’t even notice I exist until you want something done! Well, I do exist, Missus, and I’ve got a fight to a little bit of happiness. An’ if I cain’t find it here, I’ll find it somewhere else.”

The events of the previous night were the crack in the dam of her frustration, and now it burst, and her loneliness came flooding out. She did not belong in this white world, could not function in this white world, would never be accepted by

this white family for what she was, which was one of them. For she was not one of them. She was some curious addendum to their lives, without place or purpose, other than as willing slave, and she didn’t want to be a slave anymore.

She didn’t want to be a slave to anyone, she didn’t want to be a slave to this family, and most of all, she didn’t want to be a slave to her love for her father, for it would never be returned in a way that would have any value to her. Simple recognition of her existence was hardly an adequate substitute for love. For the

first time in her life Queen realized that her heart was empty, and that she wanted it to be full.

Lizzie was shocked by her impudence. “How dare you,” she said. “After all we’ve done for you.”

“You ain’t ever done nothing for me,” Queen responded as she walked out of the room. “An’ you won’t ever have to now.

She didn’t run, because there was nothing to run to or from. She walked slowly up the stairs, repeating in her mind what she had said to Lizzie, elaborating on it, embroidering it, until it became a litany of the woes of her life. She went to her room, washed herself clean, and brushed her hair.

As she looked in her little mirror, she repeated her speech to Lizzie again, and it was longer still. She remembered every tiny hurt, every unkind word, every flick of the switch to her behind. She finished on a triumphant note, demolishing the phantom Lizzie, and, anger spent, she giggled. She wondered what Lizzie’s face looked like when she’d left the kitchen.

She changed into her Sunday best, and packed a little suitcase with her few belongings. She gave no thought to her destination or to her purse, which was almost empty, for her obsession was to leave. She did think of saying goodbye to Sally, but decided against it. As kind as the old Missy was, she was the one who had first told her to go.

But she did have to say goodbye to someone. She put on her bonnet, picked up her suitcase, and took a last look at her tiny, sparsely furnished room.

She went downstairs, hoping she wouldn’t run into any of the family, left the house by the front door, and made her way to the slave graveyard to say goodbye to her mammy.

“I got to go, Mammy,” she told Easter. “Ain’t no place for me here.”

The grave was untidy and overgrown. Queen hadn't had time to tend it, and the weeds were flourishing in the warm, spring sun. Queen knelt and pulled at the weeds.

"Pappy don't know yet," she said. "I don't want to see .him. I'm going afore he gets back."

It wasn't completely true. Part of her didn't want to face Jass, but perhaps part of her hoped that if she did see him he would say what she had always longed for him to say, and make everything all right again. In her heart she knew it probably wouldn't happen, but she could not dismiss the hope. And having made the decision to go, she was terrified of the consequences of that decision, for some sense of reality had dawned on her.

She had no idea where she would sleep that night, or how she would eat. She felt utterly friendless, utterly alone, and it comforted her to sit beside the only friend she had ever had.

Sally came to her. Lizzie had told her of the argument, and of Queen's extraordinary outburst of anger and intention to leave, and Sally had worried about the girl. She would not try to persuade Queen to stay, but she could not let her go without some knowledge of her future welfare. She had seen Queen walking to the graveyard, and had followed her. She stood in the trees watching the tender farewell from daughter to mother and then moved forward, to say her own goodbye.

"Weren't you going to come to say goodbye to me?" she asked Queen, gently.

Queen was embarrassed, and got to her feet.

-I*m so sorry, my dear," Sally said. "I didn't want it to end like this, but I thought it must."

Queen turned away, feeling some small spark of the anger she had felt when Sally first suggested that she go. Why? Why did it have to end like this?

Because she was nigra and they weren't? She only had a little bit of nigra blood in her. Why did that make her black?

Sally might have guessed her thoughts, or perhaps she felt the need to explain why Queen's position was untenable. Not just for here, but for her future, for the girl was impulsive, and had good reason for complaint. She looked white. She was so very nearly white.

"Wherever you go, Queen," she said, "you must remember that it isn't enough to be nearly white, as you are. Even one drop of black blood makes you nigra."

Queen did not understand Sally's purpose, and said nothing. If she was nigra, why had the blacks in the forest rejected her, as the field hands did? Only Pearl had been kind to her, but Pearl, although darker than Queen, was not black.

Sally held out a small purse of money. "I don't want it," Queen said.

"You always were a stubborn girl!" Sally tried to laugh. "Take it. We owe you this much, at least."

Queen saw the truth of it, and took the purse. She had, in all fairness, earned at least this.

"I don't suppose I'll ever see you again, Sally said. "Good luck, my dear."

It was then that Queen realized an extraordinary thing. Miss Sally did love her, in her way, after a fashion. Why else would she be crying? All of her anger evaporated, and was replaced by an enormous sense of loss. She hugged Sally to her.

"Oh, Missus," she said.

They walked down the hill together, Sally using Queen's arm for support, and when they got to the house Sally wished her luck again, and said goodbye again, and hugged her again, and then went inside.

Queen took a last look at the house, and then set off down the drive. She didn't look back, even when she turned out of the gate, but paused for a moment, wondering where to go. It was not a difficult decision. South would take her past the Hendersons, which was unthinkable. North would take her to Florence. She turned left, to go north.

She hadn't gone very far before she heard a horse riding up behind her, and for a moment she was scared, thinking it might be one of her pursuers come for her in daylight, but there was nowhere to run now, so she turned to face the rider.

It was Jass. He had seen her from a distance away, from behind, and from her clothes and her suitcase he made a guess that she was leaving. But mostly, he was relieved to have found her.

"Queen," he called out. "Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere."

She was pleased to see him and not pleased to see him. Frightened that he would let her go, scared that he would not let her leave.

141's leaving," she said. "For good."

Jass glanced at his house, where Lizzie was.

"Miss Lizzie?" he asked her, but Queen said nothing, and he knew the answer.

It was for the best; it solved so many problems. Queen was part of his past, part of the South's past; there was no real place for her in his new life. It would solve so many problems for her, too, and make things very much easier with Lizzie. But he would miss her.

"Are you all right? Do you have money?" he asked, and she nodded.

-You can take a horse," he said. "It's too far to walk."

“I’ll manage,” she replied.

There was nothing else to say. What could he say? Only goodbye.

“I’ll miss you,” he said.

She almost broke. At that moment, she would have changed her mind, she would have gone back, put up with Miss Lizzie’s tantrums and too much work and too little pay, just to know that he loved her, or cared for her, or appreciated her. All he had to do was ask. All he had to do was say one little thing. He didn’t say any of them.

“Goodbye, Queen” was all he said. “Good luck.”

Suddenly, he spurred his horse and cantered away, up the drive to the mansion that she had loved, and that she would never see again.

She watched her father ride home to his family, and then, head high, she picked up her suitcase and began to walk away, off on a great new adventure, off to a bold, bright somewhere.

When Jass reached the house, he stopped his horse and looked back for a last glimpse of Queen.

He’could see her tiny figure trudging away down the road to Florence, resolute and brave, and for a moment he was filled with a sense of his own failure to her. He wanted to ride after her, call her back, bring her back to the place that was her home, but could not.

He sat on his horse for a long time, long after he could no longer see her, hidden by the trees, and he sent up a little prayer to God that she find some safe

haven.

Then he rode to the stables, dismounted and tended to his horse, and went into the big house, looking forward to his supper. It had been a busy day in Florence, and he still had much work to do.

He seldom thought of Queen again. But sometimes a fragment of memory of her came into his mind, and he would smile. And sometimes, when that happened, he would take a leisurely walk to the slave cemetery, and sit beside Easter's grave, and mourn what he had lost.

67

The day was hot, and the sun at its zenith, sapping Queen's energy and resolution. Blisters on her feet, which had begun the previous evening, were hurting her, and she sat on her suitcase at the side of the road, took off her shoes, and nursed her aching feet. Why had they built the house so far from town? How far had she come? How much farther did she have to go?

He could have given her a ride. She could have taken a horse. She'd have said yes if he'd asked her one more time.

She began to have doubts about her enterprise. It would be so easy to go back, to beg Jass's forgiveness and accept the role she had been cast in, but pride, or dignity, or stubbornness, would not let her do that. By her reckoning, she was about halfway between The Forks and Florence, so to go back was as arduous as to go on. Except that there would be a bed waiting for her if she returned, and there was nothing in store for her if she went on. Needing some sense of security, she counted out the little purse of money that Sally had given her.

Twenty dollars! It was an unbelievable sum to Queen, who had never had any money of her own. It made her, in her own

mind, rich, and solved many of her immediate problems. She had to find somewhere to sleep that night, even if it meant spending some of the precious cash and staying in the old slave quarters at the hotel, so the sooner she got to Florence, the sooner she could rest. Knowledge of her new wealth gave her renewed energy, and she got to her feet, sweating in the blazing sun, and limped on.

The time came when she had to relieve herself, and she looked around for a suitable bush. She always chose the spot with great care, because once Parson Dick had gone behind the bam and had peed on a homet's nest. The angry insects attacked him, and everyone had laughed at the sight of the immaculate Parson Dick running from behind the bam, pulling up his pants and being chased by a swarm of angry hornets. She found a tree that looked safe, squatted behind it, and did what she needed to. Again she considered her options-to go on or to go back-but the relief of her bladder made her feel better. She adjusted her clothing and returned to the road, still not entirely sure of her purpose, but trusting that something would happen.

She heard a cart approaching. There had been very little traffic on the road that day, and the few riders passing by had ignored her. She prayed she might be luckier this time.

Andy, the butcher's boy, was surprised to see her. He'd been on his rounds collecting farm-killed meat, and was heading back to Florence when he saw a white lady standing at the side of the road. He reined in the horse, and realized that it wasn't a white lady at all, but that light-skinned mulatta from The Forks of Cypress.

He drew up beside her, and touched his cap.

"Miss Queen, ain't it'?" he called cheerfully. "What yo' doin' out here on yo' ownsome? Where's yo' hoss?"

He'd always liked Miss Queen because she was so pretty, and sometimes he had fantasies of her pale body lying beside his darker one, but although he had an outgoing personality, he was shy of women, and unfailingly polite to them. Sometimes he regretted his good manners.

Queen knew she must took odd, out here all alone with her suitcase, and wasn't sure what to tell him. She wondered if a little white lie would matter, and

decided on a vague version of the truth.

“It’s a long story, Andy,” she said. “Y’see, my horse throwed me, and—

It was as much as he needed. “That ain’t no good,” he said. “I’m gwine back to Florence, but I could take yo’ back to The Forks.”

Queen needed no second bidding, and climbed into the cart.

“No. Florence will do just fine, thank you kindly,” she said. He took her suitcase.

“Yo’ leavin’ the Forks, or summat?” he puzzled.

“No, Andy, I’s jus’-ah-gwine’ visitin’,” she lied, allowing her speech to slur into something closer to Andy’s dialect.

He helped her up, and made space for her beside him, on the little bench seat. He flicked the reins, and the patient nag began to walk.

“Yo’ be careful, Miss Queen,” he told her. “Some white folk don’t take kindly to niggers on their ownsome.”

Queen knew that to be true, but didn’t have a worry in the world now. It didn’t matter that Andy, sitting uncomfortably close to her, had a problem with his body odor. It didn’t matter that the smell of the meat inside the cart assailed her senses. It didn’t matter that the seat was hard and uncomfortable. God had sent her a sign, a chariot and a messenger in the form of Andy and his cart. Her decision to go on to Florence had been the right one.

“I’s surely grateful yo’ came along then,” she said, smiling happily. She listened gravely to Andy’s tales of the dangers of life on the road, but inside she didn’t stop smiling all the way to Florence.

Andy offered her more help when they got to the town, even, he subtly hinted, a bed for the night, but she maintained her fiction that she had people to visit, and thanked him for the ride.

"Anytime, Miss Queen," he told her. "Anything I c'n do, yo' only got to ask."

He flicked the reins and rode away. Queen stood on the sidewalk and looked about her. She hadn't been to Florence since the war started, but it hadn't changed much, except that Yankee soldiers were everywhere roaming the streets, and they frightened her. There were several hours of daylight left, and so she walked away from the main street, looking for some-

where to eat. It surprised her that a couple of older white men, smartly dressed, tipped their hats to her as she walked by, until she realized that they must think her white as well. It made her feel good, and she giggled.

She saw the river sparkling in the distance, and walked toward it. It was such a lovely day.

She came to the docks, a wharf and some warehouses, and enjoyed the bustle of it all. A ferryboat, an old paddle steamer, was loading cargo, and fishermen were bringing in their catch. A couple of street vendors were selling fried catfish and boiled crawdaddies, so she bought some food and was treated with considerable respect, and called " Missy. " She settled against an old tree on the bank of the river and used her suitcase as a small table, to eat. She giggled to herself again, for she knew that people thought her white. A full stomach and the breezes from the river lulled her, and she dozed for a while in the pleasant place.

The afternoon was waning when she woke, refreshed from her sleep, her feet aching less and her spirits improved. Her prime objective was to find a place to sleep that night.

And once again, Fate, or Chance, or God, decided for her.

“Ferry fo’ Decatur leavin’ soon,” she heard someone cry.

An enterprising trader had bought an old paddle steamer that was used to transport cotton in the season, and whatever cargo they could get at other times of the year. Knowing that many people found travel by road arduous and dangerous in these postwar times, he had some modest cabins made, and began ferrying passengers between Florence and Decatur. The service was mildly popular, especially with women who needed to travel, for they thought the highways unsafe.

Decatur seemed like an excellent idea to Queen. Although she was not well known in Florence, some few, like Andy, might recognize her, and there was always the chance that she might run into Jass or Lizzie if she stayed, which she preferred not to do. Besides, the ferry ride would delay a decision about her resting place.

She bought the cheapest one-way ticket, which did not include one of the four cabins, and walked along the dock to the steamer. Half a dozen passengers were boarding, and their luggage was being loaded. Queen made her way up the gang-

plank feeling grand. She had never been on a boat of any kind, and experienced that sense of nervous excitement that is common to all first-time sailors, for travel by ship is the most romantic adventure. Even if she wasn’t going very far, she was going somewhere, and anywhere had to be better than where she had been. Smoke belched from the stacks, the wheel started to turn, and as the ferry honked its farewell and the lines were cast off, she felt as if she were saying goodbye to an entire old life, and welcoming a new. Wide-eyed in wonder, she stood on the deck watching the dock, the land, recede, until she was surrounded by water.

“No, you stupid darky,” she heard a woman’s angry voice. “I told you, that goes in the cabin!”

A plump, middle-aged white woman, overly dressed for traveling, was berating a deckhand.

"Yes, m'm," the deckhand said, carrying a large trunk inside. "I's puttin'

it dere now."

The aggrieved woman, fanning herself with a hankie, turned to Queen. It was too hot, she'd been traveling for several days, and her stays were too tight.

"You can't trust those darkies to get anything right," she said to Queen, who smiled shyly.

"And you shouldn't be out here by yourself, my dear, a pretty young thing like you," the woman continued, taking a little mirror from her reticule to adjust her hat and hair. "Those darkies would have us away as soon as look at us. If you take my meaning."

The woman, Mrs. Porteous, or portly Porty, as an unkind friend once called her, hated traveling, but had no option. Her husband had recently died, and her son had been killed in the war, so she had sold her house in Natchez and was going to live with her spinster sister in Knoxville. Everything had gone wrong. The weather was hot, there was no reliable coach line from Natchez to Knoxville, and she had to change many times. Service was unheard of these days in the hotels where she spent her nights, and sleep impossible because of those rowdy, occupying, uncouth Yankee soldiers. The bonecrunching carriages, riding on rough, untended highways, had made her sick, and she had stayed in Florence for several days, unable to face the continuation of her journey. She heard of the ferry

to Decatur, and at least that was a pleasanter mode of travel, and would bring her a little closer to her destination. She had started out from Natchez with three cabin trunks, but one had been lost in Memphis, stolen, she was sure, by darkies, who were far too uppity these days, and didn't seem to know their place at all. On top of everything else, she had found her various traveling companions to be decidedly unfriendly, and she was a garrulous woman who loved having

someone to talk to.

The pretty girl was sweet. Shy, obviously, but sweet. “Such a pretty thing,” she said to Queen. “Visiting?”

Queen started to find her voice, but it was not one that Andy would have recognized. It was the voice she used when she was on her very best behavior, in front of Miss Lizzie.

“Yes, m’m,” she agreed. “Relatives. In Decatur.”

“Such a relief to find pleasant company,” Mrs. Porteous said. “So much trash traveling these days. It’s the war, it’s changed everything. I’ve been in fear of my life since Natchez. “

She stared sadly at the river, as if remembering attempts on her life, rather than the loneliness of her present widowed ekistence.

Queen was curious. Clearly, the woman thought her to be white, and she wondered how far she could push the pretense. For the first time in her life, the possibility of deceit came to her, but she justified it as a way to survival. She wouldn’t lie, but if people wanted to make assumptions about her, Queen was happy to provide corroborating detail.

“You probably haven’t heard of my pappy then,” she said. “Colonel Jackson, of The Forks of Cypress.”

Mrs. Porteous, still staring at the river, nodded absently.

“It is a very famous plantation,” Queen added, trying to think of other things that would impress.

“Our glorious veterans, such difficult times,” Mrs. Porteous said, turning away from the river. “You must tell me all about yourself. I’ll wash -up, and then we’ll find somewhere to sit, and have a nice, long talk.”

It would be a very long talk, Queen discovered later, although mostly one-sided. Mrs. Porteous had a very great deal to tell. She fanned herself away, to find her cabin, and Queen looked at the river.

It was so beautiful. The sun was going down, casting a golden sheen on the water. Life was wonderful to Queen, and she started to giggle again, because everyone thought she was white. Well, she was. She looked white, so she would be white, from now on. It had to be easier than being a nigra.

The giggle turned into a laugh, and she wanted to do something silly, like throw her bonnet into the air, but she was worried it would fall in the water. But she laughed and laughed, and some passengers and deckhands looked in surprise at the pretty white girl standing on the deck by herself, laughing at nothing.

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All of Queen's hopes for happiness were dashed by the reality of her existence in Decatur.

The once thriving country town had been laid low by the war, and if life was difficult on the land, it was close to unendurable in the towns and cities. With no industry but agriculture, Decatur, like much of the South, relied for its prosperity on a single crop, cotton, and in good years, and especially at harvesttime, that crop was bountiful. With the fields devastated, the white male population decimated, and the black males fleeing the plantations, the citizens of Decatur struggled simply to survive. Yet the times were rife with opportunity. The armies of reconstruction were slowly moving in, having made their base camps in the larger towns and cities, for land was cheap, the population naive, and everything scarce. A moderately supplied huckster could do well, and barter was the currency. The policing Union Army lacked the moral fiber of its generals. Bored with war, hating the South, longing to be home, the Yankee soldiers made the most of any situation that could be turned to their advantage. So a carnival anarchy prevailed, which suited those of a buccaneering spirit, but

proved disastrous for an innocent country girl with optimistic dreams.

Nor did Queen help her own circumstances. Totally unschooled in the ways of the world, she had lived her life within the sheltered confines of a single plantation, with a few occasional forays into Florence under the protective arm of her Massa. She might have done better if she had accepted society's leveling of her, a nigra ex-slave, but she arrived in Decatur with a dangerous self-deception. Denied her heritage, she foolishly believed that she could be what she thought she was, the white daughter of a respected family, with nothing but her own conviction and the color of her skin to support that role. Wary of the black world, she tried to insinuate herself into the white, and while passing acquaintances such as Mrs. Porteous were tolerant of her, sterner judges, such as potential employers, took a harsher view.

The first few nights had awakened her to reality. She booked into a cheap hostelry, only to discover that her fellow guests, mostly male, were always rowdy and often drunk, and the few females were of careless morality. Her supply of money, which she had thought more than adequate, dwindled to almost nothing with puzzling and frustrating speed. Having no idea of the value of money, for she had never had to handle it, she spent foolishly on food, made some small loans to other women in the hotel who disappeared without repayment, and was considered an easy touch by the unscrupulous.

She was robbed of some dollars by a couple of mendacious soldiers. They stopped her because she was pretty, and searched her purse claiming to be looking for concealed weapons, but when they gave it back there was less money in it than before.

She could not find a job. There were few to be had, and fewer still for someone who was neither black nor white. She would happily have become the most menial skivvy, but no one wanted a white girl to do that, and she applied for a job as a shopgirl, but her speech pattern, which was erratic, gave her away, and her deceit made people wary. She looked for lodgings, to reduce her living expenses, but she would not move into a black household, and white landladies regarded her with suspicion. She soon discovered, from the more blatant guests at her cheap hotel, that she had one commodity of

value, but the concept of selling what she had never given away free was repulsive to her, and she would not do that. Despair is the mortal enemy of innocence, but while Queen quickly fell into a period of selfpity, she was determined to survive, and that determination became the only weapon in her depleted armory.

But it was a formidable one. Kicked out of her hotel because she could not afford to pay and would not accommodate the landlord in her bed, she found herself a tiny cupboard below some stairs in an abandoned warehouse, and made herself a squalid home. The warehouse was an unofficial dormitory for scores of transient ex-slaves, all going to or coming from somewhere, and all of whom dwelt in the barren land that freedom, despite its promise of riches, had given them. When Queen first found the new home, she walked through silent waves of derision and dislike from her fellow tenants, but penury made her brave. She chose the cupboard because it was the only private space available, and the door had a bolt on it, on the inside, so she could feel safe. She spent some of her last few cents buying a rusty padlock from a secondhand stall to put on the outside of the door. A hefty kick would have smashed the lock, but it made Queen feel more secure, and ensured her tenancy when she was out. She learned to lie with ease and to steal with caution. In the pell-mell nighttime world of the main street, a muffin man, hawking his wares from an open stall, was her unwitting supplier of dinner.

It had first happened a couple of days after she left the hotel. She was hungry, she hadn’t had a decent meal in days, her shoes were worn thin, and her clothes were starting to look shiny and threadbare. She was scared to go into the white soup kitchen and had been rejected from the black. She wandered the street and envied even the lowliest of her fellow citizens.

She stared in the window of a provisions store, the display of food making her mouth water, and hated the ringing tones of the muffin man, announcing his wares from his cart.

“Muffins! Get your fine muffins here!”

Two hungry black boys took him at his word, and one distracted the vendor’s

attention with shouts of injury, while his companion filched a handful of muffins. But the thief was spotted, and a hue and cry began. The boys tried to run, but

were collared by some soldiers. In the commotion, Queen, furtive as a tiny sparrow, slipped forward, grabbed two muffins and hid them in her pocket.

Heart racing, she turned away, and bumped into a white man who was watching the fuss. Terrified, thinking she had been caught, Queen began an embarrassed explanation, but the man simply smiled at her prettiness, tipped his hat to her, and apologized for not looking where he was going. Queen ran.

Convinced that her guilt must be blazoned upon her for the world to see, she turned into the nearest alley, and stood in the dark for a moment, breathing heavily, astonished by her own audacity, and appalled that she had broken a sacred commandment. The pangs of hunger relieved her conscience, and she wolfed into one of the muffins there in the alley, and saved the other for her breakfast.

As she settled in her uncomfortable cupboard that night, she considered her circumstances. She would not go back. She would not return to The Forks of Cypress and have Miss Lizzie gloat over her. She could not go on because there was nowhere to go, and anywhere else might be worse than where she was. And since things couldn't possibly get any worse here, they must get better. All she had to do was survive, and since survival required food, and the muffins were not sufficient on which to live, she had to go to the soup kitchen. Her experience with the white man in the street had revived her faith in the color of her skin, but the soup kitchen was a daunting prospect, for other than a criminal life, it was her last hope.

Soup kitchens had been set up in many Southern cities and towns, by churches and charitable institutions, to help feed the many who had been made destitute by the war. Despite the equality of the races announced from Washington, they were ruthlessly segregated. Even the most benevolent charity took the view that

distressed white gentlewomen would be even more distressed to eat at the same table as blacks, and many of the ex-slaves down on their luck would have been embarrassed to reveal their new poverty in front of their former Massas. The less charitable would not tolerate integration at any level. Queen, who had once been a slave, had gone to a black soup line, but men had jeered her, told her to get her white tail out of there and get to her own kind. Queen had

been too proud to tell them the truth. Wary of whites because of tier experience with Henderson and his cohorts, she was as cautious of blacks, because of the men in the forest who had rejected her.

Now hunger gave her courage. She went to the Presbyterian Church Hall, and joined a small line of poor whites waiting to be fed. Her nerves quivering, she advanced to the head of the line, and a kindly white woman of her own age was nice to her, and gave her a big bowl of thin stew and some biscuits. Queen kept her head down and scuttled to a comer, where she sipped the delicious broth, which nourished her spirit like manna from heaven.

She went every day at lunchtime, for food was served only then, and existed on that and the occasional muffins that she stole at night. She spoke to no one, and responded to any questions from the kindly white woman with as few words as possible. She would sit alone in her favorite comer, eat her food as quickly as possible, and leave as soon as she could.

On one occasion, her spirit almost failed her. A young woman was in line, just in front of her, and Queen could tell that she was mulatta. A church warden had spotted her too. The mulatta, like Queen, kept her head down, and her eyes to the floor, but the church warden came to her and, gently but firmly, told her to go to her own people. The whites in the line hissed their angry agreement. The mulatta begged, and protested that no one would feed her, she had been rejected from the black soup kitchen, as Queen had been. The warden was moved by her desperate plight, allowed her to eat a bowl of soup outside, but told her never to come back again.

It unnerved Queen. She accepted her own bowl of soup and went quickly to her corner, trying to took inconspicuous. After a few minutes she saw that the

white woman who served the food was walking toward her. Queen wondered if she should leave now, rather than face the shame of eviction, but the woman had always been kind, and without this daily sustenance, Queen did not know how she would survive.

The woman sat beside her and watched Queen eat. She said nothing for a while, which disturbed Queen more, and soup spilled from her spoon.

"It's tough, isn't it?" said the white woman in a whisper.

"Looking white." And then she added a word that the slave women sometimes used when addressing each other.

"Sister."

Queen was petrified. "Ma'am, I swear-" she began, but the white woman interrupted her.

"It's all right, I understand," she said. She looked around, but no one was near enough to hear them if she spoke quietly.

"Same as you," she said, and smiled. "High yalla, they call it. Dirty white would be better."

It was a trap, Queen was sure. The woman couldn't possibly be mulatta-her features were fine, her skin was flawlessly white, and her hair was soft and wavy. She looked very much like Queen.

"You funnin' me?" Queen asked angrily. The woman, to convince Queen, slipped easily into slave idiom.

"Yo' think I's gwine sit in a room full a whites an' tell yo' I's colored when I ain't?"

It was hardly reassuring to Queen. “Then what you doin’ here,” she demanded.

The woman laughed. “Chile,” she said, “this here’s run by the church.

Volunteering a few hours of my time each day gives me something that money can’t ever buy. It makes me respectable. “

She had an enchanting tone of self-knowledge and selfmockery, and Queen relaxed enough to smile. Still she was careful. The trap could be elaborate.

“I’m Alice,” the woman told her, “and I was born lucky. I could choose. And who’d choose to be black? Black’s hard. Being white is so much easier.”

They talked for a few moments, and Alice suggested that Queen help with the washing-up. Queen donned an apron and worked with a will, but still she kept her head down, and avoided speaking to anyone but Alice. They helped the warden lock up, and he smiled at Queen, and thanked her, and gradually Queen started to believe that Alice was not a threat to her.

As they walked down the street on the summer day, another change began in Queen. Men smiled and tipped their hats to the lovely, confident Alice, and some to Queen, and Queen made a conscious effort to hold her shoulders back and her

head up, when for the last few weeks she had walked with a stoop, because that made her feel less conspicuous.

They went to Alice’s apartment, a spacious room with a fireplace and sitting area, and a big brass bed in one comer. The drapes were burgundy velvet, the carpet heavily patterned, the chairs elaborate and thickly padded. To a clear eye it might have looked a little tacky and worn, but to Queen it looked sumptuous.

“I picked up most of it for a song,” Alice said, throwing her bonnet on the fine mahogany table. “You’d be amazed what the old mansions are selling these

days, just to get some cash. “

“It’s beautiful,” Queen said, sinking into the most comfortable chair she had ever sat in. “Is you rich?”

“No,” Alice said, and laughed, and knew that the truth must come out sooner or later. “But I have some-generous admirers. “

Queen sat up straight. The general immorality of the world outside The Forks was still astonishing to her, and repugnant.

“is yo’ a whore?” she asked. Her vocabulary had increased in Decatur.

Alice looked at her, somewhat sternly.

“If you want to pass as white,” she said, “you must watch your speech.

Nothing gives you away faster than slave talk.”

Queen, who was still worried about Alice’s profession, was defensive. Her many frustrations came flooding to the surface, in anger and selfpity.

“I don’t want to ‘pass’ as white,” she said, all trace of dialect gone. “I am white. And I don’t want to be black, even though that’s what I am.

Little Miss In Between, that’s me. One of God’s mistakes.”

She bit her lip and turned away, because Alice had been kind to her. She got up to leave, thinking she must have offended, but Alice came to her, took her face in her hands, looked into her eyes, and smiled that confident, selfmocking smile.

“Yo’ ain’t a mistake, chile,” she said, in thick dialect. Her hands moved to Queen’s straggly, dirty hair, and her eyes twinkled.

“But yo’ smell,” she said. “Yo’ smell baaaaaad!”

Queen could not resist the warmth and generosity of Alice's personality, and she smiled, and hiccuped because she thought she was going to cry, and Alice laughed, and held her for a moment, and told her it was time for a bath.

They went down to the pump and got buckets of water, which they heated on the stove in the outhouse laundry. Alice pulled out an old zinc bathtub, filled it with water, and Queen stripped, a little shy about her nakedness in front of this woman who might be a whore, but who laughed about everything. Queen slid into the tepid water, looked at her feet which were filthy, and was appalled at how slovenly she had become. Alice set to work with soap and a cloth, chattering about slave dialect and proper speech, but Queen hardly heard her. The sudsy water, the sense of being clean again, the presence of another human being who seemed to care about her, and the relief of having a possible friend who understood her peculiar circumstances were all that mattered to her. She even ceased to worry about Alice's possible profession.

Alice was not a whore in the sense that Queen understood the word, although she had some admirers who were generous to her in return for her favors. She preferred to think of herself as a "demimondaine," although society might have had a less tolerant name for it. She had been raised to it, for her mother had been a maid in a fancy house in Atlanta, before the war. Her pappy was a white Massa who had raped her mother and, on discovering the pregnancy, had sold his slave away. Her mammy was bought by the house, and cared for by the whores during her pregnancy. When Alice was born, she was everyone's darling, and some of the regular clients would dandle her on their knees and give her little presents, and whisper into her infant ears that they would look after her when she was a big girl. Her mammy was eternally grateful to the ladies for their charity, loved them and took care of them, worried about them, comforted them when they cried and nursed them if they got sick. She lived in the dependency in back of the house, with the other slaves, and Alice had grown up in that special half world of easy virtue and rewarding vice. Of consistent tolerance for class, race, and creed, and rigid rules of behavior. Of generous benevolence by hypocritical pillars of

male society, which was all tinged with the potential for violence that is inherent within a prostitute's life.

Many expected that Alice would grow up into the profession, and handsome offers were made for her virginity in her early teens, but her mammy counseled strenuously against it.

"Take care a what you got," she told Alice. "It's all a girl has got. Don't let it get wore out. "

Still, she was a slave, and the time came when she had to do her Missy, the madam's, bidding. Happily, enchanted by her nubile body, the man had broken her into the adult world without too much pain. Her mammy protested vigorously, and so Alice, her deflowering having reduced her value, became a part-time whore, allowed to partake in the activities of the house if she wanted to, not if she didn't. Eventually, she fell in love with a handsome young man, and he, besotted with her, swore that he was going to marry her and take her away from all this. After a six-month affair of mutual bliss and reciprocal planning, he stopped coming to the whorehouse and Alice never saw him again. It broke her heart, and she became less generous in her attitudes toward men, and never again believed what they promised. She developed a small but regular clientele of older, wealthy men, who were less likely to make rash promises, and were generous with their presents.

The war came, and the siege of Atlanta by General Sherman changed Alice's life. When the triumphant Union troops swept into the city, the whorehouse was a natural arena for the drunken, rampaging soldiers. All the prostitutes were raped, and when the madam protested, she was beaten so badly she was scarred for life. Alice, cowering in the dependency with her mammy, was found by three soldiers, and when her mammy tried to stop the ravishing of her daughter, they killed her, and raped Alice anyway. The house was burned to the ground with the rest of the city, and the employees scattered to the winds. Alice, friendless and alone, spent days on the road, until she was adopted by a Confederate officer, who fed her and tended her, and gave her money to get to Decatur, and an introduction to one of his friends there.

They met in a hotel, and the friend, George, was as generous to her with his money as she was to him with her body. He set her up in a nice apartment, and visited her from time to

time, when he could get away from his wife. It was a perfect arrangement, for George was not jealous of any other male admirers Alice befriended. His wife was a demanding and jealous woman. Keenly aware that secrets were difficult to keep in a country town, Alice kept a low profile, was selective with her favors, and worked hard to achieve an apparent respectability.

Alice tried to explain something of her life to Queen, avoiding the more exotic details, and concentrating on the rape, and her subsequent resolution that any white man who wanted her would have to pay dearly for the privilege.

They lay together in the big brass bed, and Queen, who had never slept in a comfortable bed, sank into the thick feather mattress and nestled her head into the clean down pillow. Alice had burned Queen's ragged old clothes, and had given her a lovely silk nightgown to wear. The window was open to the summer night, and a cool breeze calmed Queen as she listened to Alice's sad story. She tried to come to terms with Alice's admission that she accepted money from men, but had great difficulty with it.

"I couldn't do that," she said, but she didn't want to offend. "And anyway, I'm not pretty like you."

Alice laughed, and looked at her.

"What did they do to you in that big old mansion," she asked. "Didn't anyone ever say nice things to you? Didn't anyone ever tell you how pretty you are?"

Queen stared at the ceiling and remembered her life. No one had ever told her she was pretty. No one had ever said anything very nice about her.

Except one person.

“Only my mammy,” she said, and the memory of Easter made her sad.

“Well, your mamuny was right,” Alice told her. She was silent for a moment.

“Mammys always are,” she said, and some soft sadness in her voice made Queen turn to look at her. She was staring at the ceiling remembering her own mammy, and a tear was trickling down her cheek.

Queen could not bear to see her new friend in distress. She reached out and gently stroked Alice’s hair.

“I miss my mammy,” Alice whispered.

She took Queen’s hand, kissed it, and held it against her cheek. They drifted to sleep, the pair of them, side by side, each loving the closeness of someone who wanted nothing except friendship, and each remembering her own dead mammy.

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They were fast friends within days, and the only thing that worried Queen was that she had no money and was completely reliant on Alice’s generosity.

Alice insisted she shouldn’t worry about it, two could live as cheaply as one, and the right job for Queen would come along eventually. In the meantime, they should simply enjoy life. In doubting moments, bewildered by Alice’s continuing hospitality, Queen wondered if her new friend had a devious purpose, if Alice was trying to prepare her to accept the concept of giving her favors to genflemen, and she would become quiet, and sulk for a while, but then Alice would dazzle her with some small kindness that didn’t seem to require any return, and Queen would laugh, and be happy again.

The truth was simpler than Queen's occasional imaginings. Alice needed Queen's friendship almost as much as Queen needed hers. The attentions of men came easily to her, for she was a lovely woman, but she was brutally aware of the price they expected her to pay. Despite her circumspection, and her careful cultivation of a respectable image, and despite her devoted hours of charitable work for the church, mild rumors about her virtue were whispered through the town, and no woman of any standing would befriend her. Added to this, she was living a very dangerous lie. She passed for white without question or demur, but if one hint of her true blood was generally known, she could easily have been run out of town, or worse. More sophisticated than Queen, Alice had watched the

Southern whites close ranks upon themselves, vigorously and sometimes violently excluding anyone who had even the tiniest drop of black blood or was rumored to have it. Alice cleverly deflected all questions about her past, and developed a vague and tragic story of parents lost in the war if anyone persisted in asking. Which few people did. Some of her wiser gentlemen friends had suspicions of her secret, but kept quiet about it so that they might continue to enjoy her company. Wanted by men only for what they could get from her and tactfully shunned by women, Alice was lonely.

Like calls to like, and when Alice had seen the mirror image of herself in Queen, her need for a friend overcame her usual caution. There was only a small element of risk, for Queen could pass for white at least as well as Alice, and was an eager student, willing to learn the intricacies of behavior that their fragile position demanded. Alice had no desire to lead Queen astray, no designs for some career of immorality for Queen, and no expectation of Queen other than the return of friendship, and in this Alice was amply rewarded. Like sisters separated at birth who had suddenly found each other again, they had similar tastes and ambitions; yet as much as they were alike, they were also different, but these differences complemented each other. Or perhaps loneliness made them blind to how different they really were. Alice was teacher, Queen her pupil. Alice was sophisticated and Queen naive, yet Queen longed to be worldly-wise, and Alice was desperate to know less. Each wanted to be loved and settled in

some stable domestic situation, and if Queen was more optimistic about the immediate prospect of this, her simple faith blunted Alice's cynicism. They were united in their determination to live as white, and if Queen was less acutely aware of the dangers of being thought black, it was only by degree.

Alice listened soberly to the story of Queen's life, and smiled at her blind adoration of her Jass. Alice had never known her own pappy, and needed a father figure sorely, and while she distrusted men, she sympathized with Queen's irrational faith.

It amused Alice, who had grown up among paints and powders, that Queen didn't even know how to put makeup on, and they spent a delightful evening subtly coloring Queen's face.

When Queen looked at the results in the mirror, she gasped at her own beauty. It intrigued Alice that Queen had no clothes, and she ransacked her wardrobe for gowns that her friend might wear. It enchanted Alice that Queen had never been to a dance, except to watch and serve as a slave, and she wondered how Queen would respond to an evening of simple, uncluttered fun. And it would be an excellent test of Queen's behavior in the midst of the enemy.

Queen was triumphant. She looked lovely in a lilac gown of Alice's, her hair in ringlets, and her face artfully painted. Alice, in blue, laughed at Queen's nervous excitement. They walked into the church hall together on a warm Saturday night, and were immediately cheered as the belles of the ball. Some might have thought the dance a little hick, but to Queen it was a glamorous occasion. The tables and chairs had been cleared to the side, the hall was decorated with lanterns, and a small band played good music badly on the stage.

An older gentleman, George, her old friend, offered Alice his arm, and when they swept away to dance, Queen panicked at being left alone. She crept to her favorite comer, for this same hall was the soup kitchen at other times, and

watched the dancers dance, just as she used to watch balls at The Forks, and swayed to the music, and prayed that someone would ask her to dance and thought she would sink to the floor in embarrassment if anyone did. She saw a tall, moderately handsome man staring at her and glanced away, but as immediately glanced back, and the man winked at her. Queen blushed and looked to the floor, and saw a pair of feet walking toward her. She looked up into the eyes of the moderately handsome young man, who introduced himself as Morgan, and called her gorgeous.

“Sir, I am a lady!” Queen gasped, because she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Morgan grinned. “You’re also the prettiest thing in the room,” he laughed, and offered his an-n. “Shall we?”

Queen saw Alice nodding encouragement to her, and took the plunge. She accepted Morgan’s arm, and they moved onto the dance floor. She could hardly believe this was happening to her, when, not so very long ago, she had been destitute.

Now she was happy, dancing in a pretty dress with a moderately handsome young man. It was the stuff of dreams.

She was a good dancer and had been taught well, but excitement and nervousness made her clumsy. Morgan winced in pain.

“You may be a lady, but you don’t dance very well,” he said, and Queen was mortified. She began to apologize, but Morgan was blithe.

“It’s all right,” he said, laughing again. “I’ve got strong boots on. “

His laughter was infectious, and Queen relaxed and remembered her lessons, and danced the night away, and even allowed Morgan to peck her on the cheek when they said good night.

She danced round the room when she and Alice got home, and poured out her delight at the evening. She couldn't remember when she'd had such a good time, despite Morgan's wandering hands, which had added delightful spice to the evening.

Alice was pleased. Queen had passed her first public test superbly, and all her friends, especially George, had commented on Queen's beauty and manners. Vibrant with youthful energy, they chatted till dawn about the evening and about men, and then climbed into bed and drifted to sleep in each other's arms, secure and happy.

Queen agreed to a date with Morgan and saw him a few times, but while he was always laughing, his hands were always wandering, and one day, on the riverbank, they wandered too far. Queen told him off, and wouldn't see him again.

This came on top of a scolding from Alice, who was beginning to wonder if her student was learning far too well. She had been with Queen earlier that day, shopping, and a poor black had approached them, begging for money. Queen had snapped at him not to bother her, and called him a nigger. Alice was appalled, gave the man a few coins, and called Queen a little minx. Only weeks ago, Queen had been in the same state as the beggar; now she was all airs and graces, putting labels on herself.

"You'd better be careful," Alice said, "because pride usually comes before a very nasty fall."

Queen flushed, and pouted, but realized she was in the wrong and apologized. Her afternoon with Morgan, however, did nothing to improve her humor. Looking forward to sharing her misery with Alice, she came home to a cold supper waiting on the table, and a note saying that her friend would be out for the evening until late. Queen guessed that Alice was seeing George or one of her

other admirers, and, upset by Morgan and this first real evidence of Alice's immorality, she sulked for the evening. She climbed into bed early, and lay waiting for Alice to come home.

Alice had a fine evening. While she was fond of Queen, she had a deep need for the company of older men and the security they represented to her. She had curtailed many of her activities since Queen's arrival, but now it was reassuring to be in George's company, to be dined and wined in a private room at a small hotel, and to be made love to by a man of some experience. And she had some very good news.

When she came home soon after midnight, Queen was waiting for her, tucked up in bed with the sheet pulled securely under her chin.

Queen's eyes darted with anger. "Where you been?" she demanded. Alice was not surprised at her reaction. She knew that Queen had become dependent on her, perhaps overly so, and she was relieved that, if Queen behaved properly, that dependence would soon be reduced.

"Out," she said, taking off her bonnet and checking her hair in the mirror.

"You sleep with George?" Queen demanded again, and Alice shrugged.

"You're nothing but a whore, despite your fancy words," Queen snapped, and Alice snapped back.

"How I survive is my business, Queen," she said. "Don't call me names."

"It bothers me," Queen replied, burying her face in the pillow. Alice came and sat on the edge of the bed.

"That's a pity, because George is a very nice man, and very rich," she told Queen, enjoying the news that she had. "And he has a job for you, if you want it."

Queen looked at her in horror. "I won't do that sort of work!

“You won’t work in a flower shop?” Alice murmured, a smile dancing at the corners of her mouth.

The effect was all she could have desired. Queen stared at Alice, whose smile had broadened into a grin. Suddenly, Queen squealed in delight, and grabbed Alice. The two of them rolled on the bed together, laughing and making great plans.

It was just the job for Queen. Although few folk had much money to spare, flowers were a cheap extravagance; a small bouquet did much to alleviate the stress of reduced circumstances, and those who did still have money were conscious of the social niceties. The small shop was in a building George owned, and was open only three days a week. On the other days, Queen would ride around the country in a cart, gathering abundant summer wildflowers, or buying garden blooms from people who were happy to get a few pennies for what had cost them nothing to grow. On the days when the shop was open, Queen would arrive early in the morning and fashion her harvest into pretty bunches and bouquets, and she soon learned how to make simple wreaths for the dead. Surrounded by nature’s artless beauty, she blossomed herself, and was popular with her customers. The fragrance of the flowers and the simple constancy of their perennial renewal seemed to attach itself to her, and she relaxed and lost the edginess that insecurity had developed in her. She didn’t even care anymore about Alice’s occasional nocturnal expeditions, but was tolerant of all her friend’s foibles.

She looked after her customers well, and was sensitive to their requests, often scouring the countryside to fulfill their special orders. And she always made sure she had roses, for there was one customer, a tall, darkly handsome man, immaculately dressed, who came by almost every day, and always bought only a single rose. He had a slight limp in his right leg, and walked with a cane. Intrigued by him, attracted to him, she once asked him if the rose was for a special woman friend, and he turned to her with sad, sorrowful eyes.

“it is for the grave of my poor dear mother,” he said.

Queen’s heart bounded. She expressed her sympathy, and the man went away

with his rose, while Queen fell into a

daydream. This melancholy man was her ideal of her prince. Every day she had his rose ready for him, and every day he paid, thanked her, and left. He never smiled, but sometimes he looked deep into her eyes, and made Queen's legs turn to jelly.

On a hot June day he came into the shop, and Queen apologized for her roses. He always bought white, but Queen had only red roses that day. He looked at the lovely flower, and then into the distance. He paid for the rose, but didn't leave.

"Is something wrong?" Queen asked, and now, for the first time since she had known him, he smiled.

"No," he said. "But this one, I think, is for you."

He gave Queen the red rose; he took her hand and kissed it gently, then left. Queen almost swooned with delight.

Within a week he had asked her to accompany him on an evening stroll by the riverbank. Fireflies danced in the bushes beside the river, and the lamplighter was lighting lanterns on the levee. He introduced himself as Digby, and he was the complete Southern gentleman.

"From the first moment I saw you, surrounded by roses, I haven't been able to get you out of my mind," he told her. "I trust you do not think me forward, ma'am?"

Queen was trying to be the complete Southern gentlewoman.

"Why, no, sir," she said, remembering Miss Lizzie at her simpering best.

"I was most pleased when you asked me to accompany you this evening."

"You are not from these parts?" Digby asked her.

Queen hardly hesitated for a moment. The evening was flawless, and she had learned well from Alice. Mystery, Alice had told her, intrigues a man.

“No,” she murmured. “My home is-far away-”

“And your family?” Digby persisted, but still Queen did not fret.

“A very old family, sir,” she told him. “My pappy-” she cursed herself inwardly at the slip, smiled at him as if she had let loose a pet name, and corrected herself. “My papa was a colonel in the war. He lost an arm.

”

Digby smiled ruefully and tapped his leg with his cane, “You fought in the war?” Queen asked him, to deflect attention from her own background.

“It was my duty and my strong and passionate cause,” Digby said softly.

“Your father is Colonel-T’

Queen fanned herself with her hankie, and pretended she hadn’t heard him.

“My,” she said, “the evening is so warm. I wonder if we might find a cool drink somewhere? I declare I am dying of thirst.”

Digby laughed, and offered her his arm. “I cannot have you die, my dear,”

he said. “I have waited too long to find you.”

They walked away toward the town, and talked of the weather. Digby didn’t ask about her family again that evening, but spoke of the war, and the chaos of the reconstruction of the South. Queen sighed with relief, thinking she had got out of a difficult situation rather well.

She saw him again the next day, and the next. Each evening they went for a

stroll along the river, and he was never less than a gentleman to Queen.

She loved his innate good manners and his poetic civility to her, and began to believe that this was how her father must have been, as a young man.

Digby did not push the subject of her family further than Queen thought was tolerable. She admitted she came from Alabama, and that her father was Colonel Jackson, but she never referred to Florence, and spoke only of “the plantation” when talking about her home. She elaborated on her own childhood with stories of her half brothers and sisters as though they were full siblings, and gradually she came to believe her own stories, because they had so much of the truth in them. If Digby’s questions became too provocative, she would ask him about his own family, and especially his mother.

“She died from grief, I think,” Digby said. “My father was killed in the war, but she accepted that. She believed it was our duty to fight and, if necessary, die for our country. When we lost the war, she lost her cause, and passed away grieving for our vanished world.”

The romantic in Queen completely understood, but the survivor in her was confused.

“But she could have lived,” she said, thinking of Jass, and Miss Lizzie and Miss Sally. “She could have gone on-”

“In the cesspool that the South has become?” Digby said bitterly. He paused for a moment, as if looking for the words to express his deepest feelings.

“it is against God’s law to pretend that the blacks are equal to us,” he said.

Queen did not dare turn away, but stared at him as if hypnotized. Her mind was crying, screaming. He could not be so cruel.

“We offended God when we lost the war, and he is visiting a terrible

judgment on us. Look what is happening to the country now. Imagine what it will be like when they start electing niggers to Congress. “

He looked at the twilight sky.

“I hope God is satisfied,” he said.

Queen knew she should say nothing, but she had to say something. She had to defend her indefensible position.

“Do you hate black people so much?” she whispered, and added an outrageous variant on the truth. “I was always very fond of our nigras.”

To her surprise, Digby laughed. “I don’t hate them; they simply are not our equals,” he said. “But they are not to blame for what happened. The Yankees are to blame. It’s the Yankees I hate.”

Queen breathed a small sigh of relief. She knew she was on the thinnest of ice, but as long as he didn’t actually hate nigras, and as long as he never knew the truth about her, they could be happy together. For she hoped that they would be together.

Alice was less sanguine.

“You be very careful,” she said. “Sooner or later, he’s going to have to know the truth.”

They were working in the soup kitchen, preparing food, whispering to each other,

“I already told him the truth,” Queen said defensively.

“That your mother was a slave?” Alice asked, in a taunting whisper, and Queen had to admit the truth.

“No, not that part,” she said. Why wouldn’t Alice leave her alone? Why did she have to spoil it? Digby was the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to Queen. He had asked her out to the theater on the Fourth of July, and Queen

had never been to a theater. Everything Digby did was new to Queen, and she loved him for it.

"Oh, I could spank you," Alice said angrily, who had asked George about Digby. He knew very little about the man, but enough. "He's a white Southern gentleman from a good family, and he was an officer in the Confederate Army. How's he going to feel when he discovers he's paying court to a nigra?"

Queen had no answer for her, except her usual, blind response. "if I don't tell him, he won't know!"

Alice pressed her advantage. She wasn't worried that Queen was seeing Digby, she was worried that Queen was becoming much too fond of him.

"Every moment you're with him, you're living a lie, and one day you'll slip," she said. Queen looked at her angrily.

"He's good to me, he looks after me," she retorted. "I feel wonderful when I'm with him. For the first time in my life I feel as if a man cares about me."

She looked so lost and lonely and vulnerable, and yet so alive, that Alice realized she had a hopeless case of infatuation on her hands. She prayed it didn't develop into love, for she remembered her own first love and the pain it had bought her, and she didn't want that same pain for Queen. But alarm bells were clanging in her head, for Digby was an enigma to her, and the unknown frightened Alice.

"Then let him take care of you, but don't care for him too much. Don't let it become love," she said, knowing it was too late. "Love is dangerous for women like us."

Queen, hopelessly, helplessly in love, bridled at the comparison. "I ain't like you," she growled, and turned away to serve food to a woman in the line. The woman, thin and hungry and rattily dressed, much like Queen had been not so

very long ago, took her soup and biscuits gratefully. She looked around to make sure no one was listening, and whispered her awful gratitude.

“Thank you,” she said. “Sister.”

It hit Queen like a thunderbolt. The woman scuttled away to eat, and Queen stood staring after her. How had she guessed? More important, why hadn’t Queen known? Was it true? Did you become so secure you got careless? All her selfassurance flooded out of her. She turned away, and saw the flames in the small stove where the soup was kept hot. The flames danced in her mind, jolting her back to a nightmare

chase through a dark forest, and a memory of two black men sitting round a campfire who had rejected her when she was in such distress. She felt the hunger she felt then, the need to eat, the need for comfort, the need for protection and reassurance.

She did an odd thing. She snatched a biscuit from the pile and stuffed it into her pocket.

She turned away, feeling guilty and afraid, and saw Alice staring at her.

“What are you doing?” Alice asked in amazement, for Queen had no need to filch food.

“Nuttin’,” Queen whispered miserably, slipping into dialect. “Ain’t doin’

nuttin’.”

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Digby had guessed that Queen bad colored blood almost from the moment he saw her, for he was a consummate liar himself and lived a fantasy existence, of

his own fabrication. Almost nothing that he told her was true, although some of it had a basis in fact. His father, still living, had not fought in the war, but was a moderately successful lawyer in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, too often distracted by business to pay much attention to his family. His mother, also still living, doted on her only surviving son, and spoiled him as a boy, indulging his every whim. Strong, arrogant, and handy with his fists, Digby had been a bully at school, who delighted in beating up younger, smaller boys, and seemed to get some perverse pleasure from it. His preferred victims were the younger sons of the landed gentry. Digby resented his lowlier station, and despised his father for not having made more of a fortune.

Expelled from two schools, he was sent to a military academy, where, having,survived the violent initiation ceremonies himself, he became an expert at inflicting corporal punishment

on those who came after him. He was not unpopular with certain of his likeminded peers, for he could present a pleasant face to the world. He learned to cultivate that poetic melancholy that so entranced Queen, ingratiated himself with his tutors, and persuaded them that he could not possibly be guilty of the injuries he was sometimes accused of inflicting.

He did not lose his virginity at the military academy; he inflicted it, forcefully, on an unwilling slave girl, in the company of two of his friends. When the girl protested, Digby beat her until she bled, and when it was his turn to have her, the taste of her blood on his lips, the sound of her screams in his ears, were precious to him, and infinitely exciting.

He was asked to leave college after a nasty incident involving another slave girl, whom he had beaten nearly to death. Her Massa had protested to the dean, and Digby was sent home in disgrace. His father despaired of him, but at his mother's urging gave him a job in his own office, as a law clerk. It bored Digby, who preferred to spend his time and his salary cultivating an image of himself as a gentleman during the day, and in taverns and houses of ill repute at night. He was discreet about his nocturnal pleasures, put some rein on his propensity for violence, and was favorably regarded as a scoundrel boy who had sown his wild

oats and had rehabilitated himself into an eligible man. Although not welcome in the better country houses, he was popular among the small middle class, the city folk, and especially those parents seeking a good match for a less-attractive daughter.

He told Queen about the first love of his life, but a romantic version of that illfated liaison. The young woman in question had fallen hopelessly in love with Digby, and they had become engaged. Then the war came.

“I don’t know how or why,” Digby said sadly to Queen, “but she changed. Or I changed. Who can tell? I knew she wasn’t happy with me anymore, so I even persuaded her-”

He broke off. Queen was sure she saw a tear in his eye.

“Forgive me, my sweet love; I shouldn’t tell you this,” he said in a tone of infinite regret. “I even let us become lovers, before marriage, thinking that might keep us together, butthere was a captain in the army. She ran away with him.”

For a moment it appeared that he could not go on, and Queen touched his hand gently.

“Perhaps she thought him more of a man than I,- Digby said ruefully. He indicated his leg.

“I lost the full use of my leg in the battle of Wilson’s Creek. I am not a complete man anymore.”

The truth was rather different. Digby and the young woman had become engaged, and had become lovers, but against her will. Unable to control his lust, obsessed with finding out what female blood looked like on white skin rather than black, Digby had raped his fianc6e, and beaten her violently. She told no

one of her disgrace until she became pregnant and tried to kill herself. In the ensuing scandal, her brothers broke Digby's leg with an iron bar. They would have killed him but for their sister's hysterical intervention, and they contented themselves with twisting the fractured leg, to make it difficult to mend. Laudanum became his only comfort. Digby's father gave him a sum of money and promised a weekly allowance if he would never come within a hundred miles of Baton Rouge again. It broke his mother's heart.

Digby volunteered for the army, but although they would not have him at first, as a cripple, they took him later as a quartermaster, and his was a pleasant war, far removed from the front lines. After the surrender, he wandered the South looking for somewhere to live, and had settled in Decatur, a small town far enough away to make rumors of his scandalous past unlikely.

His father's regular remittances averted a need to work, and he spent his days in idleness and his nights at the inn. So it was that he saw a beautiful young mulatta working in a flower shop, and wanted her at that moment, and set his heart upon having her. Queen's denial of her blood and her fabrications about her past amused him, and he played along with them. The more complex the chase, the more intense would be his eventual pleasure, and the more satisfying her pain.

Alone at night, he would laugh at Queen's innocent faith in the success of her deception. Did she really think he didn't know? He could smell a nigra bitch a mile away.

On the Fourth of July, he dressed in formal evening wear, hired a hansom cab, and called for Queen at her lodgings. She

was wearing an elegant pink dress that left her lovely shoulders bare, and Digby could hardly restrain himself. He kissed her hand and her arm, and then her creamy shoulders, and the desire to sink his teeth into that exquisite flesh, to hear her gasp in pain, and to see a drop of her nigra blood spring forth was almost irresistible to him. Soon, he told himself. It must be soon, for the old, familiar

urges were upon him.

Queen and Alice had taken considerable care with her toilette. Alice had made the gown herself, and gave Queen a string of white beads that looked like pearls as her only jewelry. Before Queen left, Alice repeated her warning, and Queen smiled, and assured her that everything was going to be all right.

Digby's ardent greeting, romantic yet with a hint of something dark and unsettling, awoke curious feelings in Queen. When she felt his teeth bite hard into her shoulder, it disturbed her, and she gasped in pain. Digby looked at her, and his smile was not reassuring. As she rode to the theater beside her handsome beau, Alice's warnings rang in her ears, and she began to worry, for the look in Digby's eyes was one she had seen before, in other men, at other, frightening times.

Independence Day was an ambivalent festival in the defeated South, but occasions for a celebration of any kind were rare, and society made the most of them. Women brought their loveliest gowns, hardly worn since before the war, and the evening clothes of many of the men gave off a vague smell of camphor, used in storage to repel moths. The street was brightly lighted, and the theater patriotically decorated in red, white, and blue bunting, although there was little evidence of the Union flag. A crowd had gathered outside to enjoy the spectacle of the arrivals, and cheered their favorite local politicians and city fathers, especially those who had been vociferous against the Yankees. Poor women sighed with envy at the silks and satins, the feathers and fans, and the sight of a rare piece of jewelry made them gasp in appreciation. There were beggars and buskers, and food vendors and balloon sellers, and musicians, and a few disabled veterans, staring with envying eyes.

Digby's carriage pulled up, and a footman helped Queen alight. Her simple beauty brought audible response from the

excited crowd. A shabbily dressed black man ran to the horse and grabbed the bridle.

"Look after the horses, suh?" he begged, for sometimes he earned a few cents

that way, but the coachman told him to get out of the way, and the beggar turned to Digby.

11 Please, suh, just a few pennies," he pleaded. The coachman, who was also black, flicked his whip at the beggar.

"You heard the Massa," he shouted. "Out of the way."

The beggar, who had been lashed too often when he was a slave, angrily grabbed the whip, and pulled the coachman from his box.

"Yo' don't whip me," he cried. "I ain't a slave no mo'."

A scuffle developed and a crowd gathered round, cheering or hissing or just enjoying the sport. Lashing out at anyone, the beggar knocked a bystander against the horrified Queen.

Queen screamed, and Digby struck the beggar hard, viciously hard, with his cane. The beggar roared in anger and launched himself at Digby, who raised his cane again, quite ready to defend himself. His eyes were sparkling at the prospect of the violence, while a little part of his mind wondered what Queen was feeling.

Others, street-rough whites, rushed to Digby's aid and quickly subdued the furious beggar.

"He cain't do that," the beggar yelled. "He cain't hit a rugger no mo'!"

A burly white man disagreed with him. "We can do what we damn well like, coon," he said, slamming his fist into the beggar's face, knocking him senseless. Digby was enjoying himself, the evening was off to a splendid start, but considerations of etiquette were demanded now. He put his arm around Queen and shepherded her toward the theater. There were cheers of approval from some of the white bystanders, and the mayor, who had seen it all, greeted them in the foyer.

"Well done, old man," he congratulated Digby, shaking his hand. "I don't know what the world's coming to."

Digby smiled. "Damn monkeys should be shot," he said. And looked at

Queen.

She was miserable. The evening had been so full of promise, but the ugly fight, and the statements of hatred toward blacks, which she had heard often but had not expected on

this night of nights, depressed her. She worried that perhaps Alice was right, and she wanted to flee the theater, run home to where she was loved, and have nothing more to do with Digby. She had persuaded herself that his racial intolerance was no threat to her, since he would never know her true blood, but now she was not so sure. She had seen a frightening look of lusty joy in his eyes when he hit the beggar, as when he had bitten her shoulder, and for a dreadful moment she imagined him hitting her as brutally if ever he found out the truth. Yet now he was himself again, charming and gentle, escorting her into the lamplit theater and introducing her to people of rank and honor, and being completely attentive to her. But she could not rid her mind of the bloody face of the beggar.

She had never been to a theater before, and it worked a little of its magic on her. She felt a rush of expectation when the band struck up, the lamps were dimmed, and the curtain rose on a b1lightly lighted stage. The pretty costumes and gaudily painted scenery distracted her for a while, but when a soprano started to sing "Dixie," the audience rose to their feet to sing with her. Queen loved the song, but she was supremely conscious that she, a mulatta, was alone among two hundred whites chorusing the anthem of the Confederacy, and the strident passion of their voices made her want to cry.

After the show they walked down to the riverbank to see the fireworks.

It was a small, cheap show, but glorious to Queen, who had never seen fireworks before. Her fears disappeared in a cluster of rocketing color, and she turned to Digby, her eyes glistening.

"Isn't it wonderful," she cried, but he did not seem to be sharing her

excitement.

“Those of us who fought for the Confederation don’t find much joy in it,”

he said.

Queen turned back to look at the fireworks again, her spirits dashed.

“I wonder if your father is celebrating in Florence,” Digby asked her casually, softly.

Queen didn’t look at him. Fear shimmered down her spine. She had never told him exactly where she came from. But he knew.

“I know all about you,” she heard Digby say. “There aren’t too many Jacksons of Alabama. I know his plantation is called The Forks of Cypress, and that it is a few miles outside Florence. Not so very far from here.”

The image of Digby striking the beggar came into Queen’s mind again. She thought she might run, but he would catch her easily. She stood stock-still, staring fixedly at the river.

“I also know that his estate has gone to rack and ruin since the war,”

he said.

It hadn’t been so difficult for Digby to find out, for Florence was not so very far away, and he had many connections. He guessed what was going through her mind, for he had chosen his moment to tell her, and the words, most carefully. It amused him to watch her, too scared even to look at him. A tiny, frightened sparrow, trembling, in the expectation of immediate disaster.

He let the implicit threat drift into the night, and then put a smile into his voice.

“You silly goose. We’re none of us what we were.” He could see her tension melt away and her beautiful shoulders droop, from relief.

“I’ve watched my family’s fortune fade to nothing but a stash of useless Confederate notes,” he continued. “We are all poor now.”

She turned to took at him at last. She had been such a fool. He didn’t know everything about her; he knew only what anyone could find out. Fear still lingered in her eyes, but it was overridden by her need for reassurance. He touched her sweet soft neck and let his fingers trace up to her chin. Gently, he pulled her face up to his. His mouth was inches from hers.

“Here we are,” he whispered. “Two lost and lonely people who have found each other at last.”

He kissed her tenderly, letting his lips just brush against hers, and looked into her eyes again.

“I’ve no right to ask you, and I know I should ask your father first, but I think he will understand,” he said. “Will you marry me?”

Queen stared at him, in wonder, and dread, and foolishness. She felt faint, and thought she was going to fall, but his strong arms were there to support her. He held her to him and kissed

her, and she felt his tongue caress her lips and edge its way into her mouth.

Every rational instinct in her body told her to say no to him, to break away, leave him now, get away from him now, but she was betrayed by all her senses, and her heart and her mouth said yes.

Alice called her a fool, a blind, stupid, dangerous fool, and slapped Queen’s face to knock some sense into her. She couldn’t marry Digby and keep her blood secret forever. He was bound to find out, by a slip, or a well-meaning acquaintance, or what if she had a baby, and a little pickaninny popped out? At

acquaintance, or what if she had a baby, and a little prehammy popped out? At the very least, Digby would want to meet Queen's father, and then he would know that Queen had tricked him, lied to him from the moment that she met him. And then what would he do?

The image of the bloody beggar came into Queen's mind, and she wept, but Alice was pitiless. Queen blurted out the story of the fight at the theater, and told Alice of Digby's frequent statement of hatred for blacks, and Alice stared at her in consternation.

"Then why did you say yes to him?" she asked coldly.

"I don't know!" Queen told her truthfully. She didn't know why. Except that she was fond of him, and wanted to be loved. And the potential for violence that she had seen in him so alarmed her she would have done anything not to offend him.

Alice fought hard to make her see reason, but even if Queen agreed with her, she didn't know what to do.

"Get out of this, girl, as fast as you can," Alice told her. "You've been playing with fire too long."

They argued for half the night. Queen knew Alice was right, but was too stubborn about her own romantic mistake, and too frightened of Digby to tell him the truth. Alice blamed herself, but not in a way that Queen understood. Alice was regretting that she had been stupid enough to take in this foolish girl who was putting everything Alice had worked so hard to achieve at risk.

"Don't you understand? It isn't just you," Alice insisted. "It's all of us who can pass. We all come under suspicion then, just for knowing you."

Finally, Alice delivered her ultimaturn.

"!f You don't break it off, you will have to leave," she said.

Queen could not believe her ears, could not believe her friend was sa ing this, but it had its effect. Caught between y 4~

the devil and the deep blue sea, Queen could only choose the lesser of the two evils, Even if Digby hit her, as he had hit the beggar, it could be not worse than losing the only security she had, her friend and her home.

Emotionally exhausted, Queen slept badly and late. She dressed soberly, and made her way to Digby's lodgings. She tapped on the door, and when he opened it, he smiled and expressed his pleasure and surprise, but wondered if they should go out, for they would be alone in his apartment.

The lack of a chaperone did not bother Queen. It did not affect what she had to do.

She had never been to his apartment before, and was surprised at how untidy the sitting room was. She had thought him a man of neat habits.

Perhaps she was seeing him with clearer eyes, for suddenly he didn't seem to be quite as handsome as before, but fitted into his seedy surroundings.

The drapes were drawn against the midday sun, and papers were scattered over the floor. Through the open door she could see into his bedroom. The bed was unmade, and there was a smell of dirty clothes in the air. He hadn't shaved yet, and his shirt was unbuttoned and the sleeves rolled up.

She could see his muscular arms, and he made no attempt to put on a jacket, or disguise his body from her. His smile, which had made her heart melt only a short few days ago, now seemed to be leering, and a little contemptuous. She was very frightened of him. The air in the room was close and stuffy, and when he asked why she had come, she thought she might faint. She looked very pale, and he sat her on a chair and brought her some brandy. She choked on the strong drink, and he laughed, and assured her it was completely medicinal. She could not resist the feeling that he was enjoying her discomfort.

He came close to her, sat beside her, and stared at her. His look was unnerving, for she could see no trace of his usual kindness in it.

"I wrote to your father today," he said.

The room spun about her, and Queen fell to the floor in a swoon.

Digby picked her up, carried her into the bedroom, and laid her on the bed. He didn't bother to tidy up the covers. He didn't need neatness for what he planned to do.

Queen was not insensible for long, and when she woke she was disoriented for a moment. Then she remembered where she was, and clutched at her clothes, but he had not molested her. He was not in the room, and she got up to leave. Perhaps he had gone out, and she could get away and come back some other time to do what had to be done, but then she thought of Alice, and lay back on the bed in despair.

There was a tap on the door, and Digby came in, carrying a small bottle and a glass.

"Wide awake?" he asked. She nodded, and wondered how long she had been asleep.

"Only a few minutes," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed beside her.

"Now, drink this. It will make you feel better. "

He poured a little clear liquid from the bottle into the glass, and gave it to her to drink. Queen knew from the smell it was laudanum, and she didn't want it, but he insisted. Reluctantly, she swallowed a little of the drug. She was surprised that he took a sip of it too.

He stroked her face and told her how pretty she was, and how naughty they were to be alone in his bedroom. His hand caressed her neck and her shoulders, and she tried to pull away, but she felt lazy, and wann, and nothing seemed very important. His voice was so soothing.

“Relax,” he crooned, “let the drug do its work. Don’t you feel better?

Don’t you feel good? Don’t you feel as if you’re floating on a fluffy pink cloud?”

Queen nodded slowly, for she did feel like that. He told her he took the opium to relieve the pain of his war wounds, but he had not been wounded in the war, and had been addicted to laudanum for some years. His voice had no sense or meaning to her; she was drifting in a timeless mist and nothing mattered anymore. It didn’t matter when his hand moved down to her breasts and he fondled them with gentle but increasing

urgency. It didn’t matter when his hand moved down to her hips and down her leg and pulled up her dress and lifted her petticoat. It didn’t matter when he kissed her full on the mouth and forced his tongue into her. It didn’t matter when she felt his hand move up inside her leg, or that she could feel his hard manhood pressing against her. She was lost in an erotic heaven, and his lulling voice, speaking of his love for her, was the music of angels.

But now something else began to happen. Perhaps she had not taken enough of the opium to surrender to him. The rough stubble on his chin grazed her cheek, and when he kissed her, he chewed on her lips, until it became unpleasant to her. He started to pull at her camiknickers, and when she tried to stop him, he became more forceful and pushed her back on the bed. The fear of his increasing violence battled with the drug, and she struggled against him, which made him laugh. He pinched her hard, and slapped her rump, and it hurt her. She cried out, and her cries of pain mingled with his cries of lust. He hit her again, and there was nothing playful in it, and she saw that same look in his eyes as when he hit the beggar. She tried to twist away from him, but he grabbed her by the arms and dragged her back to him. He ripped her petticoat and her knickers and forced himself between her legs, mauling her breasts, slapping her face, biting her shoulders. He wrenched at the buttons on his pants, and pushed her head down to his groin. When she screamed, he hit her again and told her to do it to prove that she loved him.

He thrust himself into her mouth, and pushed her head down onto him.

Queen gagged and gasped and pulled herself free, and screamed at him the one thing she thought might stop him.

“I’s nigra!” she cried.

But he only laughed.

“You stupid slut,” he said. “Do you think I didn’t know?”

She stared at him, unable to believe him. How could he have known’?

“It was a game,” he said. “A funny, delightful game. I wanted to see how far I could go before you told me. Did you really think I would marry a slut like you?”

Her last defense was gone, and all she could do was try and get away. He might do anything to her now.

“Now the game’s over and you lost,” he said. “So you have to pay.”

She tried to run from the bed, but he caught her, and hit her with all his might. She screamed and fell, blood running from her mouth. The sight of it brought a terrible new intensity to his already frightening urgency.

“Bitch,” he yelled, and hit her again. “Cheap, nigra bitch.” He smiled an awful smile.

“You’ll get what cheap nigra bitches deserve.”

He forced himself into her mouth again, thrust himself into her while she gagged and cried. He hit her rump, a dozen times, each time harder than before. When she tried to pull free from him again, he smashed his fist into her face. He tore open her bodice and bit her breasts until he drew blood.

He twisted her over onto her face, and locked her arm behind her back with

his hand until she thought he must pull it from its socket. With his other hand he pulled up her dress and forced himself into her from behind, like a dog. Yet he was careful. Even at the pitch of his frenzied desire, a greater passion ruled him, and at the time of his climax, he spilled his seed onto her and not into her, for there were enough nigger bastards in the world already.

Pain was searing through her like lightning. She screamed, and begged God to save her, and eventually God could not bear to see her in so much agony, and delivered a merciful oblivion unto His tormented daughter.

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He kicked her out when he had finished with her, toward dawn. Beaten and bloody, she staggered through the quiet streets to her only sanctuary. Her mind refused to remember what she had been through, and all she understood was the pain of the present. Her clothes were tom, and she pulled her coat tight around her, as if to cover her shame. Walking was

difficult for her, and some of her wounds were still oozing blood.

The stairs to Alice’s apartment daunted her, and she sat for a while, halfway up, and tried to find some reserves of strength. But she was so close to home, so close to help, so close to someone who might understand what she had been through, that she pulled herself up, and went to the apartment.

Alice had not slept. She was still fully clothed, staring at the empty fireplace. When Queen came into the room, Alic~ saw her sorry state, but felt little pity for her. Violence toward women was not uncommon in the world in which Alice had grown up, and what Queen had done was worse than any physical beating.

“You told him,” she said. It was not a question, but Queen nodded, puzzled by the coldness of her friend.

“We’re not going to be married,” she whispered, and sank into a chair.

She wanted Alice to come to her, hold her, caress her, and tell her that she was loved. Alice did something else instead. She went to the window and pulled back the drapes, to reveal a pane of shattered glass.

“How could you tell him?” she asked.

Queen’s head swam. She had done what Alice wanted. Why was she so angry?

Alice picked up a small rock from the floor. A note was tied to it, and she gave it to Queen to read.

Some words had been roughly penciled on the note: “All nigra bitches will die.”

Alice shrugged. “Him, or his friends,” she said. “They’ll all know by now. “

She turned on Queen in anger. “How could you tell him? You knew you were playing with fire. How many warnings did you need?”

Queen hung on desperately to the only truth she knew. “He raped me,” she whispered piteously.

It made no difference to Alice. Rape was part of a woman’s destiny to her. Survival was all, and Queen had put their survival at perilous risk.

Word would spread like wildfire, a couple of mulattas successfully passing as white, and the consequences of that public knowledge were too hideous to imagine. Queen’s whispered admission of her blood was a

hurricane that tore down Alice’s elaborate house of cards. She guessed what had happened.

“And you told him, to try to save your precious virginity?” Alice said, in

amazement. She had no concept of what virginity might mean to a girt like Queen.

Queen nodded miserably. “It was all I had,” she said. And then anger, ignited by Digby’s cruelty and Alice’s cynicism, exploded inside her.

“And no one got the right to take it away from me, without my say-so,”

she blazed. “No matter what the cost!”

The little tirade cost her dearly, sapping the last of her energy. She slumped in the chair again, caressing her beaten body. Her mind was numb as she listened to Alice’s plans. Queen would have to leave, get out, get away, somewhere, anywhere, Huntsville, Savannah, North, to the devil, for all Alice cared. Alice would lie low, and wait until any hue and cry had died down. She would spread the word that she had kicked Queen out when she discovered she was mulatta. Her admirers would help, and perhaps she might survive. She set about writing a note to George, ignoring Queen, as if she had already gone.

Queen did not even beg to stay. She knew it was useless, and she didn’t want to remain in the same town as Digby. Or even Alice. She cleaned herself up as best she could, and tended her injuries. She had no plan for the future and dared not remember the past. There was only what she had to do now. She wanted to take nothing of Alice’s with her, she wanted to leave as she had arrived, but simple public decency demanded at least a change of clothes, and she put another cheap dress into a bag. She didn’t bother saying goodbye to Alice, for she knew there would be no response.

She avoided the center of town because she didn’t want to run into anyone who knew her, but made her way to the river. She stood on the bridge looking down at the Tennessee River, and thought how simple it would be to end it all, to let herself slip, fall into the fast, flowing water and welcome oblivion.

She didn’t slip, she didn’t fall. She had no idea of where she would go, or what she would do, but she would go somewhere and she would do something, because she could not

believe that God intended anything else for her.

She picked up her bag and walked across the bridge, a distant memory ringing in her ears. The talk she used to hear among the slaves was her drumbeat.

North. North. North.

North was the promised land to a slave, and if she could get to the North, her troubles would be magically, mysteriously, over.

The road to the North led to Huntsville, and Queen trudged along, a weary pilgrim making her lonely progress.

It was hot. Heat haze shimmered on the road, and dust from the passing carriages sprayed into her hair, into her wounds, calming them, binding them, but no one who passed by offered a ride. Blacks thought she was white, and whites thought she was trash, and the only person she had to talk to was God, but she cursed her friend now, for what He had brought her to.

She walked slowly and rested at the roadside frequently, because every step was painful, and by the end of the day, she had only covered a short distance. As a bloodred sunset swept the land, she couldn’t go on anymore, and when she saw an old barn by a deserted farm, abandoned in the war, she went to it, to find some little comer in which to rest.

Others, a few blacks, were there before her. In these postwar, postslave days, thousands had become drifters, searching aimlessly for the fulfillment of the promise of freedom. Any barn, any deserted building, any roof that offered shelter for the night was temporary home to an aimless community of stragglers.

A group of men sat round a fire, and a woman was boiling some roots and a rabbit. Queen limped toward the group, uncertain of the protocol. She looked for some separate shed in which she could hide, and be alone, and lick, like a dog, her bruised body and battered heart.

The blacks stared at the new arrival in contempt, because she was not black. A

white woman here was dangerous, but Queen stood her ground.

“I need somewhere to sleep,” she said.

No one spoke for a while, and then a man jerked his head toward the old pigsty. Queen was not shocked by such a lodg-

ing, or asharned to accept it, and the animals were long gone. As she walked toward it, she heard the blacks whispering among themselves, and some women giggling

She walked into the pigsty and almost fell to the ground, too exhausted to go on, now that she had found her haven. She rested her head against the wooden pen, and dozed for a while. When she woke, it was dark, and the blacks at the camp fire were eatinp. The smell of the food made her realize how hungry she was. She stood unsteadily, and walked a few paces toward them.

The woman who had made the stew looked at her. Her face was expressionless, showing neither compassion nor contempt.

“Is yo’ hungry?” she asked, and Queen nodded her head, thinking the woman might be kind, as Pearl had been to her, in the forest.

But the wornan was not Pearl. She looked at the plate of food in her hand, and again at Queen, and she hurled the plate to the ground.

“Eat that, whitey,” she sneered. The simple gesture contained all her anger at the things her Massa had done to her when she was a slave. She hated white folk.

Queen was beyond insult now, and accepted what the world had to offer. She saw a couple of pieces of bony meat in the mess at her feet, picked them up, brushed the dirt from them, and went to the pigsty to eat.

She heard the women laughing at her distress again, and the men talking in

frightened whispers of things she did not understand, and the woman who had thrown the food was being told off.

“Shoulda bin mo’ friendly,” she heard a man’s voice say. “If’n dey come tonight and she tell ‘em what you done, could go bad fo’ you.

“Here, girt,” he said, and threw some half-eaten corn husks into the pigsty. Queen did not understand his change of heart, nor did she care. She gnawed on the food until it was gone. She found some old straw, fashioned it into a rough bed, and lay down to sleep.

They came while she was asleep, the three white men, on horseback, with scarves tied around their necks and pulled up

to hide their faces. They carried burning brands, and rounded up the blacks who had been sleeping in the barn, chased them with fire, and made sport with them.

Queen woke to the screams of some of the women. Tucked in a comer of the pigsty, she peered out and saw a white man ride up to the barn and throw a burning brand at it. The old dry wood of the building caught fire like tinder, the hay in the stalls speeding the progress of the flames. The blacks left inside scrambled for safety, and the night rang with their screams.

One woman didn’t get out fast enough, and was engulfed in flames. All this Queen saw from her hiding place, as in a daze, a perverted dream, a nightmare of horror. She saw the white men round up the blacks and force them from the property. The blacks begged for mercy, but the white men were resolute. The blacks were not welcome here. They had wanted freedom and they’d got it. But not here.

Satisfied with their night’s work, the white men galloped away. The blacks, scared to return to their camp, and having no reason to now, stared at the burning barn and then drifted into the night to find some other shelter.

Queen was transfixed by the fire. The flames of the burning barn merged with the fire of the campsite in the forest and the brands of her pursuers, and she heard Henderson's laughter again, and the insults of his friend.

The firelight glittered in her eyes, flames that would haunt her forever.

In the day she walked on toward Huntsville, without any sense of direction except the elusive North. It was harder this day. Her bruises had developed, and her injuries were sharp and scraped at her body like razors. The small energy that had come to her with her determination to get away from Decatur had deserted her with her night's rest. The sun beat down on her, and her lips were dry. Every step was an achievement.

She could see the city in the distance, but it gave her no joy, for she couldn't imagine that it held any promise for her. She began to believe that she could not go on, and that there was no point. Still she didn't stop. Scattered farms gave way to scattered houses, and there was more traffic on the road, but no one stopped for her.

She thought that even God must have deserted her, and then she heard a choir singing a hymn, and saw a little church in the distance. It was a rough-and-ready building of unhewn timber, hastily put together, but a small steeple surmounted by a wooden cross announced its purpose. Queen could tell it was a black church from the sound she heard; whites never raised their voices like that. She expected to be evicted from it if she went in, but she had no choice. She could not survive the parching, noonday sun.

The Preacher was a dedicated man, who had honed his sermons at services held in the open cotton fields that some Massas used to allow their slaves to attend. He had developed a stentorian voice, and could make his sermons ring to the open sky that had been the roof of his makeshift churches. His ministry was to bring hope to his people, not in this life but in the glorious peace that was to

come.

” Our troubles in this mortal world can last a day, or a year, or a lifetime,” he shouted at his congregation, and they vociferously agreed.

” But they cannot last forever,” he told them. “Forever is eternal, and our mortal misery is but a moment in the blinking of God’s eye. And when that moment we call life is done, we will be taken up into the bosom of His sweet love, in glory, and our troubles will be banished forever.”

The congregation roared its agreement, and no one noticed a tiny white woman sneak into the church through the open door, and fall against the wall at the back.

” Taken up in Glory!” the Preacher yelled again. “We will dwell in the eternal sunshine of God’s love, in Glory! And we will forget our agony, and we will forget our pain, and all the misery of our human days, because we will live in His eternal Glory! “

The crowd was clapping now, and cheering him on. The woman at the old pedal organ looked at the ecstatic congregation, her heart awash with the love of Jesus. But she was puzzled to see a little white woman, bruised and dirty, leaning against the wall near the front door of the church.

“Not just for a moment,” the Preacher cried. “Or a day, or a year, or a lifetime. But fic’ever. And fo’ever. And fo’ever! In Glory!”

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“Hallelujah,” the people sang, raising the roof. “Oh, glory hallelujah!

”

“Let us pray,” the Preacher exhorted them. His flock fell silent, and the Preacher noticed the strange white woman near the door. He stared at her, because white women didn’t come into black churches. Gradually, the

congregation turned to Queen, until every eye in the building seemed to be staring at her.

She had to do something to make them understand; she had to let them know how much she needed help; she had to say something to stop them from throwing her out, for here was her only salvation. But it was so hard to say. Despair and defiance struggled in her heart, and she was shaking with emotion. When she spoke, it was in a whisper that only those close to her could hear.

"I's nigra," she told them. And when no one responded, she said it again, louder now.

"I's nigra!" And louder again. "Nigra! Nigra! Nigra!"

Only the Preacher replied.

"Hallelujah, sister," he said. The crowd chanted and clapped its approval.

The simple relief that flooded through Queen astonished her. She felt as if she had found home, after years lost in the wilderness.

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Joyce, who played the organ at the church, was a motherly woman, and took charge of Queen. She took her to her ram shackle home in the black shantytown on the outskirts of Huntsville, ordered her children to clean up the shed and make up a rough bed for their new guest, and told them that they were not to bother Queen. She tended Queen's injuries, bathed her bruises and bound her wounds. She made Queen sit in an old rocking chair on the rickety porch, and fed her hot soup.

She didn’t. ask how Queen came to be in such a state, for she knew the girl would tell her in her own good time. What she needed now was to be alone in caring company. The tribe of children obeyed their mother, but were curious about their visitor. Two of Joyce’s girls sat in the yard pretending not to stare at her and, at their mother’s suggestion, watching out for her welfare. Although Queen never guessed it, for the time she stayed with Joyce she was seldom out of someone’s sight. Abram, Joyce’s husband, came home in the evening, and was told of Queen and introduced to her, and politely offered her the hospitality of his home. He had been a slave, like his wife, and was an expert blacksmith. After the war his former Massa, appreciative of his skill, set him up in his own business, and Abram worked seven days a week to provide for his large family and pay off his loan.

After a rowdy family meal, Joyce took her to the shed where a comfortable bunk and a clean blanket awaited her. She undressed Queen, checking her injuries and clucking her disapproval of whatever had caused them. She tucked Queen into bed, as Easter used to do, and stroked her pretty hair, and hummed a soft, sweet lullaby, as Easter used to do. Her undemanding charity and patient care broke Queen’s reserve. She turned her head to the wall and began to weep, but Joyce took her into her arrns, and held her while she cried, as a mother holds her child. As Easter used to do.

Joyce was a simple, honest woman who had found a simple honest man to love. Their life on the plantation had been hard, but now, as their own Massas, they were determined to reap all the benefits that the precious freedom offered. They tried to find goodness in everything about them, and because they sought it, and recognized it when they saw it, they found it more often than most, and praised it, and ignored or dismissed the bad. The children were following in their parents’ footsteps, for Abram was a stem but fair father, and Joyce a generous mother who shared her love equally, and set a firm moral tone for her offspring. Their second son, Wash, was not their own, but a light-skinned quadroon who had been born with a crippled leg. His real mother had died when he was little, and Joyce had adopted him, and loved him. When Wash’s father, who had never had much time for his son, ran away from the

plantation at the start of the war and was never seen again. Abram simply

accepted the boy's temporary presence in his house as a permanent fact and Wash could not remember that he had ever had other parents.

The family, with its easy, raucous familiarity and overtly displayed affections, was a revelation to Queen, who had never known such simple treasure. Within days she became part of the household, appreciated by all of them, and they in return gave her the simple gifts of uncomplicated laughter, of sibling bickering that vanished as quickly as it arose, and the understanding and support that came from mutually shared problems. Each evening the family sat together on the porch, Joyce and Abram in rocking chairs, and the children squatting on stools or on the ground, and discussed their day, with its joys and its dilemmas, and counseled each other, wisely or badly, but with care and affection.

Queen would join them and she heard with increasing awe the squabbles and discipline, the jokes and the advice, the gossip and the news, for this was how she wanted her life to be. No one cared if she was white or black, but all were solicitous of her welfare.

One warm evening she was alone with Joyce on the porch. Abram was working late, and the children had been allowed to go to a sock hop. Joyce rocked gently, knitting for the coming winter, and Queen sat in Abram's rocker, watching the moths dance around the lamp, and listening to the sounds of the shantytown night. Music and laughter and sometimes a distant, angry voice. And mothers singing lullabies. She began to talk, softly, slowly, haltingly, of her experience in Decatur, until the whole awful story tumbled out. Joyce said nothing throughout, but went on knitting, and nodded from time to time, to let Queen know she was listening. When she finished, Queen was surprised that she wasn't crying. She had relived the nightmare of Digby's rape in every bloody detail, and it caused her much pain, but she didn't want to cry. She told the story of Alice's rejection of her, from a slightly different point of view, with some sympathy for Alice's predicament.

Joyce made no comment on the story, but put her knitting away, and suggested they pray for the forgiveness of those who had treated Queen so badly. Queen smiled and shook her

head, an intolerable burden lifted from her shoulders. She might pray for Alice, but never for Digby.

Queen prayed often and fervently these days. She went regularly to the church of her salvation with Joyce, and was encouraged by the Preacher to believe that her footsteps there had been divinely inspired.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,” the Preacher intoned, “for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.”

And Queen agreed.

What surprised Queen most was how easy it had been. She had spent her life denying she was black because she believed herself to be white, and wanted Jass and all her white relations to admit that fact, but it had only brought her unhappiness, and rejection by some of darker skin.

In Decatur she had tried to pretend that she had no black blood at all, and that had brought her misery.

Here she had accepted her blood, and had allied herself to people with whom she felt a sense of kinship, and it was giving her a rare and welcome sense of belonging. She began to understand that her rejection by the field hands was because of mutual insecurity and fear, hers because she didn’t want to be one of them and thought herself different, theirs because they didn’t understand her ambitions, and thought her different.

The sadness was that it could not last. Abram and Joyce would not ask her to leave, but Queen knew she was an additional small strain on their meager resources. Nor did she want to live the rest of her life as part of their family. She wanted a family of her own.

Joyce found the job for her, through the Preacher, who had contacts with some of the white missionaries in town. At the appointed hour, Queen, soberly dressed, went with Joyce to a sprawling, gracious house with a large and untidy garden. A tall, frail woman of late middle years, her hair pulled back in a fierce

garden. A tall, frail woman of late middle years, her hair pulled back in a fierce bun, answered the door to them, and introduced herself as Miss Gippy. She looked at Queen appraisingly and then led them to the sitting room.

Her sister, Miss Mandy, conducted the interview, for she

ran the house, but Miss Gippy frequently chimed in, usually with a quotation from the Bible that had some relevance to what was being said.

Queen, who was in a happy frame of mind, even though neither she nor Joyce was invited to sit, almost giggled at one interruption, and thought that Miss Gippy must know the Good Book backward.

Miss Mandy was rounder and less frail than her sister, of similar years and sterner stuff. She listened to Queen's qualifications, and explained their circumstances. Originally from New Hampshire, they had come South after the war to minister to the souls of the newly freed blacks. They had lived here for a year, and were in need of a housekeeper. The several girls they had employed had been either flighty or lazy, and all had left. Miss Mandy admitted they were strict taskmasters, but were fair, and Queen would get her pay, her board and her keep, and one afternoon off a week. In return she was to run the house to the sisters'

instructions.

"If any would not work, neither should he eat," Miss Gippy droned sanctimoniously.

Queen said the conditions were acceptable, and waited while Miss Mandy walked around her, inspecting her as if she were a slave on the block.

A tiny smile fought its way to Queen's lips, and she dared not look at Joyce. But she did look at Miss Gippy, and the smile disappeared to where it had come from.

Finally, Miss Mandy pronounced herself satisfied. "Excellent. And lovely teeth," she said. "When can you begin, Queen? Such an odd name."

It was agreed that Queen could begin immediately. She would collect her few belongings from Joyce, and return to prepare supper. They were about to depart, when Miss Gippy coughed.

“We should say a little prayer first,” Miss Mandy said, and knelt. Miss Gippy knelt beside her, and Queen and Joyce followed suit.

“Man goeth forth unto his work, unto his labor,” Miss Gippy prayed. “0

Lord, how manifold are Thy works. In wisdom hast Thou made them all.”

The wretched smile that Queen had fought so hard to subdue struggled to her lips again.

It was hard work, for the sisters had not had help for several weeks, and there was much to catch up on, but slowly Queen brought it all under control. She was provided with two black dresses, white aprons and caps, the cost of which was deducted from her wages, and she worked from early morning till late at night, but usually took some hours off in the afternoon, or didn’t hurry home when she went shopping. Miss Mandy had been honest with her-both sisters were strict taskmasters, but very fair, and frequently helped in the kitchen. They seldom went out, and Queen saw little evidence of their missionary work, other than their mild discouragement of her continuing friendship with Joyce.

“Obviously,” Miss Mandy said to Queen, “you have had a good education.

Women like Joyce have not, and are only a few steps from the jungle. That is why we have a mission to them. “

Queen bit her lip and didn’t answer back, didn’t defend Joyce, because she had come to understand that what the sisters called their mission was an excuse, a rationale for what otherwise would be an empty existence. They were deeply religious, and Queen’s day was punctuated by calls to pray with the sisters, or

hymns sung to a pounding accompaniment by Miss Gippy on the pump organ.

“They’re a pair of dragons,” she told Joyce, as they walked together to church. “But their fire is pretty old now.”

Sunday was not Queen’s day off, but she was expected to attend church in the morning. To the sisters’ chagrin, she always went with Joyce to the black church, because it marked an important turning point in her life, and she loved the rousing sermons and hearty, heartfelt hymns. Sometimes it all got so exciting she would get carried away, and chant and shout with the best of them, and sometimes she was sure the Spirit moved within her, and she went into a trancelike state of ecstasy-She was baptized one late fall day, just before the cold weather of winter set in. The service was held at the riverbank, where the congregation gathered and sang their joy in Jesus. A number of whites collected nearby, to watch the niggers have their fun, for it was a colorful occasion.

The Preacher stood up to his waist in the chilly water, with some deacons and Joyce beside him. Three or four celebrants stood in a line before them, teeth chattering with fervor and cold. The Preacher put his arm around Queen and roared to heaven.

“0 Lord, we beseech Thee, receive now this child, Queen, that she may be bom again, into Thy sweet grace. Just as Saint John baptized Thee, we now wash away her sins in the water of love, and dedicate her to Thy glory fo’ever.”

He held his hand over Queen’s mouth and nose, and dunked her in the river. The choir was at fever pitch. When Queen bobbed up, her eyes shining, her spirit vibrant, there was clapping and cheering.

“I know it! I know the Lord now!” Queen shouted to the world. “I feel his great love!”

Truly, she felt wonderful, and even if it was only by contrast to her earlier misery, that was enough, for she genuinely believed that God was directing her

life.

The sisters strongly disapproved of the way blacks worshiped the Lord, and every Sunday they told her she should come with them to their own church, and contemplate the wonder of His works in calm and quiet.

“Those rowdy sermons, ‘The earth am flat, the sun do move,’ ” Miss Gippy sniffed. “Dangerous stuff, Queen.”

“Clapping and dancing and singing, and dunking people at baptism,” Miss Mandy agreed. “This is heathen behavior, idolatry! “

“Voodoo and African ritual,” Miss Gippy went further. “You are not in the jungle now. You have to be civilized, even in worship. Especially in worship.”

Queen nodded her head seriously, for she had become quite fond of the old biddies.

“Maybe the Lord moves in mysterious ways, m’m,” she said. They sighed, and nodded sadly, and agreed with her, and sent her off to prepare their dinner. Just as Queen had become fond of them, they felt surprisingly affectionate to her, both for herself and for what she represented to them.

Miss Gippy had been christened Gypsophilia, a tiny flower, by sober Lutheran parents, merchants in New Hampshire, who

had hoped that the good Lord would send them a son. It was not to be. They named their second daughter Amanda, and even though they prayed with all their hearts and worked strenuously at their physical union, they were not blessed with any more children. They raised their daughters with discipline tempered by as much love as their austere religion allowed them to show, and prayed for good husbands for both of them. Again, their prayers were not answered, and the parents began to believe they had offended the Lord in some way. Materially they prospered, and could provide a good dowry if any young man had the sense to take either daughter in wedlock, but no one took the

man had the sense to take either daughter in wedlock, but no one took the opportunity.

Both girls were plain, each loved the other, and both were devoted to their church. Occasionally, men crossed their paths, and both had mild and inconclusive flirtations, but by the time she was twenty-five, Gippy understood that she had been left on the shelf, and ceased to be anxious about men, because she had Jesus. Mandy, who had a more rebellious spirit, was not so accepting of potential spinsterhood. As Gippy's interest in men declined, Mandy's became avid, and she sought out the company of any eligible bachelor with increasing desperation. As a child she adored her dolls, and as she grew up she transferred that affection to other people's children. It wasn't so much that she wanted to be married; it was that she wanted children of her own, to love, and to mother and protect, and she could not bear the prospect of being barren.

She became something of a joke, and then an embarrassment, among the young men of the town, for she sought them out and threw herself at them, but when they asked for more than she was prepared to give outside of marriage, they rejected her, and she became hysterical.

She met a young man, a shady salesman from Boston, who learned of her financial security, but not her reputation, and, to secure his own prospects, asked for her hand in marriage. Mandy overwhelmed him with her gratitude, and he began to have doubts about his neurotic fianc6e. Her parents had larger doubts about the union, for he was not religious, and inquiries in Boston told them that the salesman was not to be trusted with money, and was out for what he could get. Mandy would hear nothing against her love, and so her parents offered the

salesman a sum of money to remove himself from the district. He left for California the next day, to make his fortune in gold.

It broke Mandy's heart. She took to her room, and when she came down a few days later, she had donned a chaste composure, and settled to a life of loneliness with her sister, Gippy, and devotion to charity. They became pillars of the local church and espoused all the liberal causes, especially abolition, although neither had ever met a black person. Their parents died and left them well provided, and

they continued to live together, for they could not imagine a life apart from each other.

Humorless, austere, and devout, they were their only friends. As they grew older, the northern winters became harder for them, and they talked of moving to a more temperate climate, but would not live in a slave state. During the war, they dedicated themselves to the cause of the Union. They attended recruitment meetings and handed out flags and patriotic pamphlets to those who enlisted, wrote countless letters to the newspapers protesting the latest Southern outrages, and made a few, very small donations to those missionaries who were helping runaway slaves.

They heard lectures from those same missionaries about the appalling plight of the blacks, slave and free, their passionate faith in a form of God, and their curious style of worship.

It gave them the cause that they needed. Their hearts were appalled, although their actions were limited to supplying their church with fresh flowers. At the end of the war, they would move South, and by example and patient instruction, by simply living as good Christians, they would bring the newly freed slaves to their unforgiving God. They sought a quiet city for their gentle lives, and settled on Huntsville, where they bought a splendid house at a bargain price with their good Yankee dollars. They found a quiet church that suited them, with a minister of ascetic authority, and looked forward to their new lives with some anticipation.

Almost immediately, they realized that persuading blacks from their wild forms of worship was an impossible task, and as immediately, they became intolerant of most black people, whom they thought primitive, irresponsible, and immoral. And, in the case of their maids, lazy. They despaired of their

rambling house, and closed off most of the rooms. Miss Mandy struggled with the garden, but the verdant, unpredictable Southern horticulture defeated her, and no gardener would tolerate her imperious directions. The only reason they

didn’t sell up and go back home was because the weather suited them both beautifully, and they could not face the prospect of a long, dark winter again.

Then a young woman came to work for them who suited their purposes exactly. She was nigra but pale, and obviously her white blood had calmed her pagan genes. She was the product of a fall from grace by her father and her mother, and so was ripe to be saved. She was an excellent worker, who seldom complained. And she was young, and brought some sunshine into their crimped lives, just as the lovely Southern weather eased their rheumatic bones. That she gently resisted their attempts to bring her to their purifying, Protestant angst did not concern them. She was malleable, and they had nothing else to do. For the rest of their lives.

It was a healing time for Queen. Her new church gave her friends and unbounded joy, the sisters gave her companionship and something to complain about, and the community who had so lovingly adopted her gave her a sense of place. That Christmas was the happiest she could remember. She made presents, silly, sweet things, for all her friends, and gave Miss Mandy and Miss Gippy little lavender bags that she had stitched and filled herself. They, in turn, gave her prayer books and a new Bible. She spent a cheery Christmas morning at her church, singing the joy of Christ reborn as lustily as anyone present. She served an excellent dinner of ham, gravy, and creamed potatoes to the sisters, and ate her own food alone in the kitchen, where she took all her meals. A few days later, in that same kitchen, she wished herself a very happy New Year, and had every reason to believe it might be true.

Thursday afternoons were her own. With the nudging of spring, she would stroll in the park, or shop with Joyce, and they would go to a little caf6 and have big slices of fich peach pie, covered in cream. It pleased Joyce to see Queen so happy, and she told her so.

Queen laughed. “I love being me,” she said. “I tried being

on the other side, and now I love being black.”

“But you white as snow,” Joyce laughed.

Queen shook her head. “This black blood must be a powerful thing. One little drop of it, and you can’t be white. It’s all or nothing for them.”

She looked down and fiddled with her pie, remembering the bad times, the white times. Joyce took her hand.

“Seems to me there’s only one thing you need to make yo’ life complete,”

she said, her meaning perfectly clear, for she said this to Queen every time they met. Part of Queen agreed with her. She wanted very much to have a man in her life, but the awful memory of Digby still lingered, and she was too suspicious of men to feel comfortable with them if they showed any romantic interest in her. Her caution was easing with time, and she was trying to convince herself that Digby was exceptional, but she was not ready to test the theory.

Men who made her laugh, and who represented no serious threat to her heart or her body, were different, like the smart young man loping toward them, his eyes glinting with delight at Queen.

“Charles real sweet on you,” Joyce hinted.

“He isn’t for me,” Queen said.

“Yo’ need a man in yo’ life,” Joyce insisted.

Charles joined them, dapper, dandy, and colorfully clad. He doffed his hat.

“Miss Queen, Miss Joyce,” he greeted them, but hardly looking at Joyce.

He was real sweet on Queen. “What a very sublime pleasure.”

Joyce got to her feet. “Sit here and talk to Queen,” she told Charles.

“I see a friend over there.”

Queen laughed out loud at the unsubtlety of it, and Charles slid into Joyce’s seat.

“Yo’re looking radiant, Miss Queen,” he beamed, on his very best behavior.

“An’ what a fine big dish o’ pie. But then you just a little ol’ itty-bitty thing, and yo’ need feedin’ up.”

Queen laughed again, and hid her face in her hands. If nothing else, Charles was funny.

Charles knew people laughed at him, and used that to his advantage. Tall, thin and scrawny, and a bom survivor, he had

an unthreatening impudence and a cheeky personality and a silver tongue.

He made the most of every opportunity, and created opportunity where none existed. No one was exactly sure how he made his living, because he made his living at so many things, but he was obviously doing well for himself.

A house nigger before the war, freedom saw him flower. In the ill-supplied South, Charles could usually supply anything anyone wanted, given enough notice and if the price was right. His customers ranged from a Union general who was collecting fine antiques from impoverished mansions, to a Confederate colonel who liked to drink imported brandy at domestic prices, and scores of simple people, black and white, who knew that Charles could provide a few simple luxuries and more necessities, at unmatched prices. If an ex-slave needed a cheap plow for his few sharecropping acres, Charles could find it. If a Federal soldier wanted souvenirs of the war, Charles would talk a veteran Rebel into parting with his promotion orders signed by Robert E. Lee. If a Southern woman wished to sell, discreetly, a piece of jewelry to pay her bills, Charles was her man. The only thing Charles would not do was trade in human flesh. Asked by drunken youths if he could find them female companionship for a few hours, Charles would smile, shake his head, and extricate himself from their company. The concept of a human being selling her body to another, however willingly, reminded him too strongly of slavery, He dressed to the height of his concept of fashion, in smart suits of eccentric colors, and to the surprise of many who knew him only slightly, Charles was deeply religious, and attended the same church as Queen. He was smitten by her from the first moment he saw her, and lived in the

vain belief that one day she would come to her senses and realize what he was offering her. In the meantime, he courted her with irrepressible enthusiasm.

Joyce's encouragement of his hopes, and the fact that Queen was never actually rude to him, sustained his hope, and he was constantly thinking up new ways to convince her of his ardor.

Queen sat in the church the next Sunday, listening intently to the Preacher's sermon, and she became aware that something

was being passed from hand to hand among the congregation. It was a note, and it eventually came to her, with her name on the outside of it. Joyce beamed at her, and Queen opened the note. It said: "May I call on you?"

The fact that it was unsigned didn't confuse her; she knew exactly who it was from. She looked up, and saw Charles, a few rows away, grinning at her. She threw her eyes to heaven and then glared at him, but that didn't stop him from grinning.

She heard a knock on the front door the next afternoon, and was sure it was Charles. As she moved down the hall, she could see the dark shape of a man through the stained glass, and made up her mind that she was going to end this business once and for all.

She opened the door angrily. "Charles!" she barked. "I told you-"

She knew it wasn't Charles the moment she saw him, even though he had his back to her and was staring at the garden. He turned and looked at her with brown velvet eyes.

Queen caught her breath. He was probably the most handsome man she had ever seen.

"I'm sorry," she said, feeling foolish. "I thought you was someone else.

”

“I’s looking for work,” he said, taking off his hat. “An’ yo’ garden’s a terrible mess.”

She didn’t know what to say, and thought she must have stood silent for several minutes, although it was only a second or two. She could hear the clock ticking in the hall, and the sound of her own heartbeat.

She found her voice at last.

“Wait outside,” she said. “I’ll fetch the Missy.”

He nodded slowly, but didn’t take his eyes off her. She closed the door and leaned against the wall for a moment, then recollected herself, and went upstairs to call Miss Mandy, who was having a nap.

When she looked out of the window at the top of the stairs, the man was already at work in the garden. He had found a scythe, and was cutting the overgrown grass.

She forgot her errand, and stood watching him, until Miss Mandy came out of her room, wanting to know who was at the door.

His name was Davis, and Miss Mandy hired him after only a small negotiation.

Told that a strange black man was working in the yard, Miss Mandy, who dreamed of a formal garden, felt a small jolt of fear. But donned a righteous wrath, went down to him, and demanded that he leave.

“Who told you to do that? Who gave you permission?” she asked him sharply.

Queen hovered behind her, at a safe distance.

Davis did not stop scything. He had an easy, swinging stroke, and already he

had cleared a large area.

“I took it on my own authority,” he said. The sight of the vast black man with a lethal weapon in his hands made Miss Mandy quail, but she stood her ground.

“Get out of here at once,” Miss Mandy ordered. “Before I call the law.” It was an empty threat. There was no guardian of the law within sight or earshot. There were very few guardians of the law in this rambunctious South.

Davis agreed that she had every right to do that, but her garden was a mess, and he was looking for work. He rested on his scythe, and spoke calmly to Miss Mandy.

” If you could see yo’ way clear to employin’ me, I’d work fo’ you right hard,” he told her. “If not, or if you cain’t afford me, I’ll give you this afternoon fo’ free, coz I hates to see a garden so. “

He looked sadly at the wilderness that was the front lawn. “But if’n you want, I’ll leave,” he added.

He had an extraordinary, quiet power about him. Miss Mandy, with little evidence to hand, was sure she could trust him.

“You’re very sure of yourself, young man,” she said.

Davis smiled. “Cain’t see a reason not to be.” He stared at 636

Miss Mandy, and she blinked first. She accepted his offer of a free afternoon’s work, and if he was satisfactory, she would consider more regular employment. Davis thanked her, touched his cap, and went back to his scything. Miss Mandy watched his easy grace for a moment or two, and then went back to the house.

“I will be watching you, young man,” she called to him, as she went inside.

“Yes, m’m,” Davis replied, and looked at Queen.

Queen was astonished by him. He had handled the situation with charm and grace, and had got himself a job. And when he looked at her, she, like Miss Mandy, thought she could trust him with her life. It was too disturbing to her, and so she tried to put him in his place.

"Them roses need pruning," she ordered, pointing to the untidy, rambling rosebushes.

Davis looked at the roses. "Yes, they do," he agreed. "But not now. Wrong time of year."

He looked at her again, and she was sure he was laughing at her. Smil - ing at her, anyway, and there was something else in that smile, something provocatively unsettling. Queen scut tled back to the house, bristling with indignation, He worked hard and well all afternoon, to an unseen audience. Miss Gippy, who had learned to fear black men from her few female acquaintances at their church, peered out at him from the comparative safety of her bedroom window, and prayed that she would not be raped. Miss Mandy watched from the sitting room, and it delighted her to see the dramatic improvement to her garden that happened before her very eyes. He raked and hoed and cleared, and what had been chaos became order, and visions of an English garden, of formal lawns, colorful borders, and sweet smelling roses, encouraged Miss Mandy to employ him on a weekly basis.

She went out to him, to tell him so.

Queen watched from the kitchen window as Miss Mandy talked to Davis, and tried to work out what made him so attractive. It was not that he was so very handsome, she decided now; her first impression had been wrong, his features were a little irregular. He was black, black as ebony, had a superb body, she could see, for he had taken his shirt off and was

working in his vest, but the sheer magnitude of him was, in itself, daunting. Yet somehow the complete man added up to more than the sum of his separate physical parts, and it was his eyes, Queen thought. Those dark, magic, melting

eyes, like liquid amber. No, it was his voice, deep and warm, like molasses. Or perhaps it was his personality. When he looked at her, she felt he was exposing his soul to her, while still keeping some private anguish hidden. His embracing personality, gently commanding and totally reassuring, made her want to tell him the secrets of her heart, as if he would absorb her sorrows into his own.

"The devil finds work for idle hands, Queen!" Miss Mandy had come into the kitchen. Queen had not heard her, and was startled by her voice. She shook herself from her reverie, and felt stupid. How long had she been staring at Davis? And why? He was only a gardener. She also felt a little guilty.

11 Sorry, Missy," she murmured, and hurried to the sink. Miss Mandy guessed the secret, for she was party to it herself. She would never admit it because it was dangerous, disturbing; she was too old, she had no camal needs, and desire for a black man was unthinkable. But it was there, like a little imp, nibblirfg at her conscience. Davis thrilled her, and she thought of him in the basest terms, as a magnificent, untamed animal.

"Why don't you take some lemonade out to that man in the garden?" she suggested to Queen. "He's a good worker, and it's a hot day."

Queen nodded, and busied herself with lemonade. Miss Mandy stared out at Davis.

"He seems to be a fine young man," she said. "Does he know he has a friend in Jesus?"

For suddenly she had a new cause. She would bring this lion of the jungle to the rocky, redeeming slopes of Calvary, and prayed that some other missionary had not reached his soul first.

He was fixing some trellis when Queen brought the lemonade to him. Queen set the tray on a box, and poured a glass of lemonade from the jug.

"You can have a break," she said, and to persuade him, she added her authority. "Miss Mandy said."

He didn’t respond, but worked on. Queen was a little miffed that her gracious order was ignored, but her speech lapsed from its formal vowels, and adopted some of his less cultivated pattern.

“You doin’ a good job,” she said. “Miss Mandy said.”

Still, he ignored her. What was the matter with the man? Queen wondered, temper rising a little. He didn’t even look at her, and men usually looked at her in considerable appreciation, even if she ignored them.

“I c’n give you dinner in the kitchen when you, done, afore you go home,”

she said. “Miss Mandy said—

His work on the trellis done, he turned to her. He liked to finish one job before starting another.

“Better do what she says, then.” He smiled, and her heart went pit-a-pat.

She would make him a lovely dinner.

‘Me meat was as frustrating as anything she could remember. He washed up in the laundry, and took off his muddy boots before he came into the kitchen. He sat at the table, acce pted the food she gave him, and was impeccably polite. Queen had prepared a fine dinner; she even saved the knuckle of the roast leg of lamb for him, because she remembered it had been her father’s favorite. She piled his plate with potatoes, pumpkin, and cabbage, and he ate everything she put in front of him, but in silence. Queen did her best to make conversation, but he responded to her with polite and noncommittal monosyllables. He had three pieces of her good apple pie, and when he was done, he stood and thanked her.

“That was a fine dinner, ma’am,” he said. “I thanks you kindly.”

He walked to the door, but Queen could not let him go.

“You know-” she began, but stopped because she couldn’t think of anything

to say.

He turned and looked at her with those velvet eyes, and she found her only possible lifeline.

—you have a friend in Jesus," she said.

He considered this and nodded, but absently, as if he could not imagine that he had any friends. Then said he would see her tomorrow, and left.

She came to the door and watched him put on his boots and walk away down the path, into the night.

She walked out into the garden. The sky was clear, the stars

were bright, and the silver moon illuminated the work he had done that day.

She went back inside, washed the dishes, prepared the trays for breakfast, and went upstairs to her attic room.

She went to sleep and had sweet dreams that night. She was on a hill looking toward a distant city, and she could see Jesus triumphantly approaching Jerusalem. He was wearing white robes, riding on a donkey, and was surrounded by waved palm fronds. She walked to the city, but He never seemed to come any closer to it, and soon she was close to Him. When He turned to look at her, His face was full of quiet pain. And black, like Davis.

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The pattern was quickly set. He came to work each day, and his hard labor and the bursting spring brought tranquility and a sense of renewal to what had been disorder. Miss Mandy, desperate.to find some justification for a fruitless life, saw it as a metaphor for the South, her own small contribution to reconstruction,

and infinitely more successful than that directed by the Federal government. Good Christian example and discipline was what these blacks needed. Queen and Davis were the living proof of that, not the flagrant and unjustified equality that Washington was trying to inflict upon them.

Queen and Davis. She began to think of them as an inseparable pair, and she cherished the idea of a possible union for them, a good and happy marriage, with herself as instructing governess of their delightful children. She was sure her ambition was shared by Queen, for the girl positively blossomed whenever Davis was around, and was scratchy and unpredictable on his day off. When he came back to work, his boundless composure calmed her irritability, and she, in turn, was the only one who could make him smile.

Davis built a pleasant arbor for the sisters, sheltered from

the sun, and planted climbing roses. The sisters sat there for hours on the warm days, reading their Bibles, or doing their embroidery, or simply watching the lovely garden grow. Occasionally, Miss Mandy would find reasons to speak to him, first about plants and then about the love of God, and he would listen to all she had to say solemnly, and nod his head, and tell it was much to think about. She was content with this. She was in no hurry to speed his conversion, for then what would she have to do?

During the day, he never came to the house, but Queen would bring him cool lemonade, and sit with him for a while, and admire his handiwork, Each evening he took his dinner with her in the kitchen, and appreciated her good cooking. She would chatter to him endlessly about her day, and he would laugh or sympathize or offer a few words of advice as the occasion demanded, but he would never talk about himself. He always seemed a little distracted, as if he were cogitating matters of important and insoluble moment, and sometimes Queen was embarrassed that her gossip was distracting him from his unknown purpose. He seemed to understand this, and would smile at her, and compliment her on her pie, and she would serve him another generous helping.

She didn’t know where he came from or where he lived, or what his intentions in life were, nor did she care. She was still wary of a relationship, but the fact

that this man to whom she was so attracted never did anything to disturb her peace of mind was like a balm to her hurtful experiences with other men.

As the weather grew hotter, she convinced herself that his appetite for the lemonade increased, and her visits to the garden became more frequent.

She came to him one hot day when he was working on the roof of the garden shed, to fix the leaks. He was stripped to the waist, and when he climbed down and turned away from her to get his shirt, she saw that his back was a mass of scars. She gasped, although she knew the cause of them.

"Who did that to you?" she cried. He shrugged, and put on his shirt.

"Massa," he said simply. "In the old days."

He accepted the cool drink, and changed the subject to roses.

That night at dinner, she tried to get him to talk about his bondage.

"Why they whip you that bad?" she asked.

He shrugged again. "Ran away," he said, without trace of bitterness.

"Caught me. Whipped me. Ran away again. Same thing. "

Queen had never been whipped, but had seen it often enough. She closed her eyes, to block out the image of the lash striking Davis.

"How many times?" she whispered.

"Often as I could," he said calmly. "I didn't want to be a slave, I never asked, wasn't my idea of my life. Jus' coz they white, how come they had that power?"

Queen had never met a man with his faith in the future

Queen had no answer, but put her faith in the future.

“That’s all over now,” she said, to comfort him, but Davis stared at her as if he didn’t believe her.

“Mebbe,” he said. He paused for a moment, but she could see he had something more to say.

“Ain’t changed much. I’s free, but I cain’t seem to find my place in life,”

It’s here, right here, you’ve found it, Queen wanted to tell him, but she said nothing. He seemed to be battling with some inner demon, and suddenly words flooded out of him as if a dam had burst.

“Ain’t gwine find it in the South, I reckon,” he said. “Slavery’s gone, but white folk still think like the of’ days. I don’t want to dig gardens all my life. I don’t want to be treated like a jungle nigger. I don’t want to live in a place where I ain’t ever gwine be given the chance to better myself, free or not free. I don’t want to beg for change from the white man’s pocket. “

He spoke quietly, but his voice thundered in Queen’s ears, and his magnetic personality filled the room. At that mom6nt she would have followed him to the ends of the earth.

He relaxed then, and seemed embarrassed by how much of himself he had revealed. He smiled, and shrugged again. “North, mebbe,” he said as a coda.

“They reckon a man can find his self up there.’.’

He stood up, thanked her for his dinner as he always did, and left. Queen sat on a chair, her hand shaking a little. The power and intensity of his speech, and the loneliness and anger that provoked it, had frightened her a little, for she remembered herself, when she had been in her times of greatest distress, which were not so very long ago.

He didn’t refer to the conversation when he saw her again, and resisted her mild questioning of his eventual aims in life. But he surprised her a few days later when he asked her if he might accompany her to church the following Sunday.

Queen was only too happy to agree, but asked why he wanted to go. He chuckled and said that it might stop Miss Mandy’s endless preaching at him.

The men had enlarged the church somewhat over the last few months, as more and more blacks, disillusioned with the hardships of their reconstructing society and the failed promises of freedom, sought solace from a higher source. A small choir had been formed, and Queen, with her sweet soprano voice, was part of it. A fervent believer, she sang in her most pure voice that Sunday, and she had eyes for only one man in the congregation. She was determined that she would be the bridge between him and his spiritual wellbeing, and she prayed that the simple songs would transport him on angel’s wings to the embracing love of Jesus.

As they walked home, she asked him what he thought of the service. He walked a few paces, as if putting his thoughts in order, before he replied, and when he spoke it was with his accustomed reserve and apparent lack of involvement.

“I thanks you kindly, ma’am,” he said. “Fo’ showin’ me that good thing.

It gives me much to think about.”

She was disappointed that he was not more enthusiastic, but he went to church with her regularly every Sunday after that, and while he never prayed or joined in the hymns, he would listen to the sermons with rapt attention, and discuss the meaning of them afterward as they walked home.

He became good friends with several of the men, even Charles, his erstwhile rival, and spent considerable time with Abram. Joyce told Queen later that Davis spent his days off at Abram’s workshop, helping him with the fire and forge, and ceaselessly

questioning him about working conditions, and the role of black men in the world.

He wrenched his shoulder one day, grubbing a stump of an old tree in the garden, and when she came to him with his refreshment, she found him in the potting shed trying to rub oil onto himself.

"Let me do that," she said. He made no demur, but sat on a box, and let her massage his arm and shoulder. It felt good, and he told her so.

"My marnmy taught me," Queen said, pleased. "She said it was my pappy's favorite thing."

She put more oil on her hand, and caressed his injured muscles. She could not resist staring at the scars on his back, the hideous imperfections on his otherwise flawless body. The shed was hot and quiet, and she worked in silence, but she knew she gave him pleasure. Her hands inched toward the scars, attracted to them, repelled by what had caused them. She touched them and caressed them, and soothed them with oil, and he groaned softly, the broken twisted nerves close to the surface, and sparklingly alive.

" Did it hurt?" she whispered, and was surprised to hear him chuckle.

"Waren't you ever beaten?" he asked her in surprise, and Queen felt almost guilty that she, a slave, had not suffered as other slaves.

" Not really," she said, as if apologizing. "I got the switch a few times."

Davis nodded. "Then you was lucky," he said. "It hurt."

And yet he did not believe he had the words to tell her how much it had hurt, for what words could describe that agony? They said you didn't feel it after the first few lashes, that your body and mind went numb, you fell unconscious, but that wasn't true. You felt every sting of it, or he did, and assumed he was not

alone. It cut like a razor across your back, and went on cutting and cutting, like acid eating into your flesh, until you could not stop yourself crying out in agony, no matter how strong you were.

And still it went on, pain without end, ceaselessly, unimaginably. You couldn't even count the number because it went on and on, and all you could feel was

this terrible pain, and a dreadful anger that someone had the power to do this to you for no other reason than because you were black.

If you were lucky, you fainted, but still it went on until you thought you must die.

Then, wonder of wonders, suddenly it stopped, and they cut you down, and let you go. You pulled yourself up, struggled to your feet, somehow, anyhow, just to try to hang on to some last thread of your dignity, your self. You walked away, staggered away, feeling the blood pour out of you, running down your back and your legs, and squelching out of your boots, if you were lucky enough to have boots. And you hated them with every ounce of your being for doing this to you, just because you were black, and you swore to yourself a most sacred, solemn vow, by whatever God you believed in, or nothing if you did not believe, that someday, somehow, somewhere, you would make them pay for what they had done to you. Because you were black.

"It hurt like the very devil," he said to Queen again.

He could not believe it. The power of her gentle hands had sharpened the memory of his distress, and he felt that churning, irrational anger again, and a desperate, aching sense of injustice. But beyond everything else, he felt lonely. He felt tears well up inside him, and fought like the tiger he was to control them.

"I hate them to' what they did," he said, his voice choking with unreleased and indescribable emotion.

The depth of his emotion, his profound distress, pierced Queen's heart.

She moved her hands around him, and held him close to her, careless of the oil that glistened on his back, careless of her modesty, careless of everything else in the world but the single driving need she felt to alleviate his sorrow.

"Don't hate," she whispered in his ear. "There's no need to hate now. "

"It's all there is," Davis said, for hate had become the reason for his existence. He lived only for revenge-shapeless, formless revenge-against a target he could not define. Someday, somehow, somewhere, someone would pay for what they had done to him, but he was patient, for he wanted that re-

venge to be as intense as the pain that had been so casually inflicted on him.

"No," Queen said. "There is love."

He nodded gently, as if he were considering what she had said, when in fact he was battling an urge to do something he believed must destroy him, for if there was not hate, if there was only love, what would he have to live for?

He lost the battle. His need to be not alone was so overwhelming that he turned his face to Queen and put his lips to hers, and devoured her into him, and she gave her mouth willingly to his, and her body unfolded to him, like a lotus to the sun.

But even as she surrendered to him, she resisted him. As much as she trusted him, she could believe he would not hurt her. He sensed that she was not ready, and stopped, and looked into her eyes.

She nodded her head. She loved him so, she was prepared to endure any pain he might cause, but he knew the moment had gone, and that she was not ready.

"I will not take what you cannot give," he said. He moved gently, and lay

back on the floor, and nestled his strong arm around her. She wanted to cry, but did not know why, there was no reason to cry. She rested her head on his shoulder, and luxuriated in the closeness of him, the feel of him, the smell of him. She drifted into a contented sleep, and when she woke he was still there.

He lay on his back, staring at the roof, conscious only that the sweet thing lying asleep beside him was a gift more precious than any he deserved.

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Nothing seemed to change between them, but Queen believed that something had. Their lives continued as before, with the ritual they had established, but whenever she brought him his refreshment in the garden, he was always outside, and Queen thought he engineered it deliberately, so he would not be alone with her in the shed again. To let him know how much she cared for him, and how very much she appreciated his tact and unselfishness, she would touch his hand sometimes, when they sat together in the sun. He would respond, and hold her hand for a while, but he never gave any indication, by word or deed, that he wanted more from her. These were the most pleasant times for her, and puzzling too, for she wanted their relationship to be more than it was, but did not want to sacrifice the simple beauty of what they had.

He still ate with her in the evenings, only now he would talk a little more freely to her, and sometimes offered ambiguous clues to his background. She knew he had been a slave, and she knew he resented that bondage with a deep and'abiding bitterness, that endured even now, when it was over. She knew he had been truculent, and knew he had run away several times, only to be caught and lashed for it, and that in itself confused her. He was a clever and resourceful man, and she found it hard to believe, given his resolute determination in all things, that of his many escapes none had succeeded for more than a day or two. It occurred to her that perhaps he had not actually wanted to get away, that he escaped and allowed himself to be caught again, and endured his punishment as if he believed that one day even his Massa must be appalled at the torture that had been inflicted on him, and would say enough. It would have been a mighty

triumph if that had happened, it would have destroyed the system from within, but it 647

was an impossible dream, which never came true. The fact that he was prepared to suffer such torment for such an unattainable ideal made her love him even more, and gave him, in her eyes, the stature of a saint or a martyr. She sensed his aching loneliness and his feeling of detachment, of isolation, from other people, and she believed it was her bounden duty to bring him to peace with his brethren and himself. She was certain that his place in heaven was secure, even though he was a nonbeliever, for God could not exclude such a good and caring man. What was not secure was his place on earth, and she started to think of herself as his salvation, that she, as a woman, had a redemptive power that would ease his hurt and calm his soul.

She wondered about the history of his heart. She knew he had never been married and that he had no children, but otherwise he never spoke of women. It was possible he had never been in love before, and while Queen didn't know if he loved her, she was sure that she loved him. It was a generous love, that wanted little for herself, only the knowledge that she had, in some way, made him happy. Her faith in her love was so strong that she was sure that when she exposed him to it, it would be returned a hundredfold.

Yet she had failed him. She had rejected him because of her own fears of physical hurt, and the change she saw in their relationship was that since then he had avoided any situation where she might reject him again.

She had no idea how to achieve her goal, for she was too shy to tell Davis of her love in simple terms, fearing he would not understand the depth of it. It shocked her to realize that she had never had the occasion or the opportunity to tell anyone, except her mother, how much she loved them, and no one except her mother had ever said it to her.

Whatever school there was for love that other people attended, Queen had been excluded from it.

She tried to talk about it with Joyce, but it was difficult, for how could you ask anyone what love is? They sat on the porch one afternoon when the rest of the family was about their business, rocking in unison, and Queen wondered, vaguely, about men.

Joyce knew the intention behind the quest i ion, and made a little speech about men, so big and strong and thinking they could rule the world, but really completely reliant on women.

She stressed the virtues of married life, with its joys and dif ficulties, but stressed the joys and minimized the difficulties, for she had another objective. She cared for Queen dearly, and didn't entirely trust Davis. While she liked the man, admired him, she saw too many dark forces in him and too much of the wandering soul in search of some masculine goal, to be lieve that Davis was ready to settle down with one woman.

And she didn't want Queen to be hurt. Or get into trouble.

"Still steppin' out with Davis?" she asked casually, in the little silence that followed her talk about matrimony.

Queen nodded, although she didn't know if it was true. They went together to church on Sundays, but otherwise they never saw each other outside the house. They had different afternoons off, and he never asked her out.

Joyce didn't care if they were actually courting or not, they were constantly in each other's company, and she knew how much Queen loved the man. She could read it in her shining eyes.

"Ain't doin' more than steppin' out with him?" Joyce asked her.

The question irritated Queen, and she shook her head.

“I don’t even know where he lives,” she said, as proof of her evidence.

“Down yonder a ways,” Joyce told her, nodding her head in the direction of the river, but being deliberately vague. “He got a li’l shack by the river, Abram say. ‘Tain’t much of a place, but Davis say it good enough for him.”

She could not resist a word of caution to her friend.

“Be careful, missy,” she said. “Don’t let him get too close. The man don’t even love himself. He cain’t love anyone else.”

But Queen didn’t want to hear that.

The following Thursday she made herself as pretty as could be, and left the house late. She went to see Abram and asked him exactly where Davis lived, claiming she had a message to deliver from the sisters. She found her way to the shack, intending to wait outside until he came home, but it was warm, and she wanted shelter. She tapped on the door, and saw that

it was not locked or barred. She opened the door and called out his name, but no one was there. Feeling both excited and guilty, she went inside.

It was what she might have expected, a sparse and spartan room, furnished with only a rough bed, a chair, and a broken table. There was a small trunk that was locked and she guessed that was where he kept his few clothes. Although he was always clean and tidy, for Queen did his laundry, he didn’t have many clothes, and seemed uninterested in them.

There was a tin plate and mug and a knife, and some bread and cheese in a small meat safe. Beyond that, there was nothing to indicate that anyone lived there.

Yet it was redolent of him. The sense of his presence was almost tangible to her, and she lay on his bed and put her face to the blanket, and was sure there

was a lingering smell of him. Or if there was not, it didn’t matter, because she could believe that there was. Tingling with anticipation of him, she lay waiting for him to come home.

When she heard footsteps approaching, she got up from the bed. She went to the small, rectangular hole that was the window, pushed aside the sack that covered it, and stared at the nearby river. When the door opened, she turned to greet him, but did not smile.

He looked at her, and if he felt any surprise, he did not show it. He came in, shut the door, and put a small brown bag of provisions on the table. He moved close to her, and touched her hair, but then dropped his hand to his side, as if waiting to be told what to do. She took his hand in hers, drew it to her mouth, and kissed it tenderly. She moved his hand to her neck, and traced it down over her body, and put her free hand to his neck and traced it down over his chest. She turned her face up to him and looked deep into his wondrous eyes, to let him know that she was ready to give him whatever he wanted to take.

Still for a moment he did not move. Then he leaned down to her, for he was so tall and she so tiny, and gently kissed her lips and let the tip of his tongue discover the taste of her. His mouth moved to her eyes, and he kissed each in turn, gently, and she closed them, as she knew he wanted her to do.

He picked her up, carried her to the bed, and laid her gently down. He sat on the edge of the bed for a while, stroking her hair and neck, and then lay beside her and kissed her, and opened his mouth to her, to let her know that he would be passive and not force himself upon her. She let her tongue caress his, and his mouth yielded to her, and seemed infinite.

As she kissed him, she stroked his body with her hands-his neck, his shoulders, his chest, Carefully, she undid the buttons at the neck of his shirt, and pulled the garment free from his pants, pushed it upward and upward, until she had to break the kiss, and now he helped a little by pulling the shirt over his head and off, but lay down again. He moved his hands to her blouse and repeated the

actions she had done to him, a mirror image of her need, not his. When her breasts were free, he stroked them, staring at them and at her, and delicately kissed her nipples.

She was suspended in time. The lack of urgency in him released her inhibitions, and it was she who directed his hands to where she wanted them to be. Naked now, they lay for an hour, touching, kissing, caressing, until his manhood became a friend to her, and she welcomed that friend into her body. They lay side by side, joined as one flesh, he hardly moving until a soft thrusting of her hips told him that it was time to do so. Never dominant, never assertive, he concentrated all his attention on her pleasure, as if his own were irrelevant. In the days and nights to come he would pay more attention to his own needs, but this time was for her.

It was exotic, languorous love to her, bringing her a pleasure she had not even imagined existed. Holding him close to her, deep inside her, her hands stroked the welts on his back that were the focus of her love, for she believed she would heal his heart, and leave it clear and unscarred, unlike his back, no matter how deep the wounds there.

When it was done, they lay together, like naked, pagan children, and tiny tears of love appeared in Queen's eyes. Davis leaned over her.

"On the plantation I swore I would drink the tears of every black who ever cried," he told her softly.

Her put his mouth to her eyes and drank her tears.

"It would be an ocean," he whispered.

He worried that it had been bad for her, that he had hurt her, but she shook her head, and laughed away his concerns. She nestled into his powerful embrace, touched his lips with her fingers, and asked why he did not smile. So he smiled for her, and held her hand, and could not tell her the depth of his love, for he had

never found love in the world before, and his could not match her own.

She came to him every Thursday, and brought little comforts for the shack, but nothing that would make him feel that she was trying to tame him. They made love every Thursday, and he never betrayed her trust in him, and never took more from her than she could give.

Fall came, and the first chill of winter. He fixed some old glass into the open space that was his window, and bought a stove so that they might be warm. He celebrated Christmas at church with her, and then walked her home to the sisters, for she had to serve their dinner. She gave him her gift, a new shirt, and he was embarrassed, because he had nothing for her. He had never given anything to anyone, because he had never had anyone to give anything to. She laughed, and told him it didn't matter. His love was all the present she needed. Yet she wanted something more.

"I want yo' baby," she whispered to him one night when they lay in each other's arms, and she thought he was asleep. She wanted to feel his seed quicken inside her, and swell and grow big in her belly, until she exploded with the product of his love.

Davis was not asleep, but he did not stir, did not open his eyes. He did not want her to know he had heard her, for he did not know how to explain to her that he would not bring a child into this world.

From his earliest memories he had been consumed with bitterness at his enslaved state. A dark and rebellious boy, he had grown into a darker, more rebellious man, and he viewed with contempt those other slaves who seemed prepared to tolerate their imprisonment, or make the best of it, for Davis saw no good to be made of it. He was known only by his given name, because he refused to take the surname of his Massa, as was common practice on the plantations, and would not

answer to it if called. He had a strong need for women, but avoided them, and deliberately chose an ascetic life, shunning human contact. He wanted no consolation or condolence for his plight, and no simple comfort that might ease it. Much as he pined for a wife and children, he would not bring a child into this world, born into bondage. All he wanted was his freedom and when he had it he would be his own man and until then he would not belong to anyone.

Not even his Massa. He did as little work as he possibly could, was the bane of the overseers, and felt the frequent bite of the lash. He ran away at the first opportunity, and thought himself, for a moment, free.

He was exultant, but the reality that his freedom was a myth soon became clear to him. As able and resourceful as he was, the chances of being able to get from southern Alabama to the northern side of the MasonDixon line were virtually impossible, and he did not know how to contact anyone on the Underground Railroad that might have eased his passage. Slave catchers and dogs came after him, and within days he was back at the plantation and was given a hundred lashes. Since he could not escape to any secure freedom, he set his mind to breaking his Massa's will. He ran away whenever he could, fully expecting to be caught, taken back, and lashed. Eventually, he thought, they must see reason, eventually they must understand that he would not stay, and then they would let him go.

Or kill him. Like Cap'n Jack before him, he thought slavery irrational and he could not understand why rational people tolerated it. In this, like .Cap'n Jack, he profoundly underestimated the society he was dealing with. His Massa would willingly have killed him rather than let him be free, for to let one slave go simply because he didn't want to be a slave was to undermine everything the society was built on, and stood for, and aspired to.

Marked as a persistent and dangerous troublemaker, when the war came Davis was kept in leg shackles, so that he would not escape, for then he might have made it to sanctuary. When he was released from those shackles with emancipation, it was almost anticlimactic to him. Having fought against one thing all his life, now he had nothing left to fight for, and he did not know what he wanted to achieve. Being free, he discovered, was rfot enough for him.

He traveled northward and what he saw appalled him. The vaunted equality of reconstruction was turning into a jungle of survival by shameless opportunists and many good and decent men were trampled in the rush.

Segregation was rampant, and they could not even ride in the same streetcar as whites. Although some black men with property could vote, how many black men had that much property? The merits of a few, a very few, were being recognized, but that was mostly patronage, crumbs from the white man's table. And it would always be like that. Always and always and always. No white man would ever give real power to a black man, or real freedom. It had to be taken.

When Queen told him that she wanted his baby, his soul blenched. There was nothing for a black boy in this world, and it was even worse for a black girl.

He loved Queen as much as he could, but not as much as she loved him. Her love collided with his hate, and it made the pain worse than any white man's lash, and sweeter than any honey.

Queen never told him again that she wanted his baby, because there was no need. He had already given her the gift that she wanted from him.

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She told no one about it until it was inevitable. She didn't believe it herself until it was inevitable. When she missed her time of the month in late November, she wasn't unduly con cemed, for she was not always regular, but as the days dragged through December she began to worry, and before Christmas she was sure. She was lethargic and often unwell, and even though she tried to pretend it was because of winter chills, every morning she looked in the mirror and held her stomach to see if it was growing, if her secret was starting to show.

Then the Preacher gave a sermon about lust and fornication, and the plight of the poor innocents brought into the world by those who could not, would not, avoid temptation.

“Fornication, and all uncleanness, let it not be named among you; let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints! “

Queen believed the words were directed exclusively at her, and cried a little, for she thought what she did with Davis was beautiful, and not unclean, but blessed in the sight of the Lord. And He had rewarded her with this precious gift, which would be hers and hers alone, and which she would love. She fought the guilt the Preacher made her feel, and became resentful, for the angel had called Mary blessed, and she was so in awe of the process of creation, of the miracle of this tiny thing growing inside her, that she believed it divine.

” From fornication, and all other deadly sin; from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, good Lord, deliver us.”

She flushed, for she had been deceitful. She had deceived Joyce and the sisters by not telling them about her baby. She had even deceived Davis by telling him that she wanted his child and not telling him her wish had been granted. But she did not believe she had sinned.

“Deliver us, 0 Lord, deliver us. Hallelujah!”

The rising shouts of the congregation, in full-throated agreement with the Preacher, made her despair, and she began to worry about the future of her child, if he should be fatherless, for she had already decided it was a boy. She despaired for herself, for what would people say to her, do to her, when they found out? She looked at Davis, who was sitting beside her. He took her hand and squeezed it gently. Queen wondered if he had guessed already, but knew he had not.

Someone else had guessed. Joyce kept her eyes on Queen during the sermon,

and saw the guilt, the eyes cast down to the floor. She saw Queen took at Davis, saw him take her hand, and saw the great need that Queen had for him. Joyce sighed, and prayed she was wrong, but knew she was not.

She would deal with it when it had to be dealt with, and until then she could only pray.

Someone else had guessed as well. Miss Gippy had sharp ears, sharper eyes, and a fervid imagination. She had no experience with pregnancy, but had a fascination with fallen women, being so far from the precipice herself. In her younger days she had spent much time in Boston, lecturing to those who had strayed from the straight and narrow, and had questioned them avidly.

She thought she knew all the classic symptoms, even if that knowledge was superficial. When she heard Queen being sick a couple of times in the morning, she smiled smugly to herself, and made a wild, but utterly correct, guess as to the reason. Miss Gippy said nothing to her sister. She preferred to wait and see what developed and take advantage of those developments to save the sinner from hell. Disillusioned with the life the Lord had assigned her, Miss Gippy had an occasional maliciousness about her, which her sister did not share.

Miss Mandy, who should have been the first to guess, never did, and had to be told. And finally it was too choice a secret for Miss Gippy to keep to herself.

Queen had developed a curious habit. Plentifully supplied with food from the sister's pantry, she began to steal food. It was no great crime, because the odd thing was that she took only what she could have had for free. It didn't happen very often, but occasionally, when she was depressed or agitated, concerned for the future welfare of her boy. She would filch a piece of toast from Miss Gippy's morning tray, or snatch a cake from the afternoon tea stand. She served breakfast one morning-crisply fried bacon and poached eggs, toast and butter and jam-and she stood waiting at the table as the sisters said their prayers. She always had to wait until the prayers were done, in case they needed anything more once they began to eat, and she was expected to pray with them.

Miss Mandy's eyes were firmly closed, as it was her turn to lead the prayer. Queen, who knew she could not keep her condition secret much longer, had her eyes firmly open, and fixed on the basket of toast.

"0 Lord, we thank Thee for Thy precious bounty," Miss Mandy intoned. "And for Thy many blessings on these Thy humble servants."

Sure that no one was watching her, sure that the sisters' eyes were closed in prayer, Queen, quickly, furtively, grabbed

a piece of toast from the table, hid it under her apron, and stuffed it into her pocket.

"Queen, what on earth are you doing?" Miss Gippy said sharply. Her eyes had been only partially closed, and watching Queen.

Queen flushed, and prayed that the floor would open up and swallow her.

"Nuttin', Missy," she said, lapsing into dialect, as she always did when she was nervous. "I ain't done nuttin'."

Miss Mandy looked up, wondering what the fuss was about.

"I saw you take that piece of toast," Miss Gippy admonished. "Don't we feed you enough, that you have to steal from our very table?"

Queen couldn't think of anything to say, and looked at the floor.

"The eighth commandment, girl!" Miss Gippy snapped. To Miss Mandy, the situation was completely confusing, but she understood there had been a puzzling crisis, and discipline was needed.

"I think you'd better go to your room," Miss Mandy said, longing to be alone with her sister, to find out what the matter was.

"After you've put the toast back," Miss Gippy added.

The miserable Queen took the toast from her pocket, put it back in its basket, and scurried from the room. Miss Mandy waited for some word from her sister, but Miss Gippy was enjoying herself far too much. She buttered a piece of toast, spread it liberally with apple jelly, and took a bite from it.

“Well?” Miss Mandy asked.

There was another little silence while Miss Gippy chewed her food. It was not good manners to speak with your mouth full. She took a sip of tea and sprinkled salt on her eggs.

“Nesting,” she said casually, and tucked into her breakfast.

It was as well that she did so, and thus could not see the look on her sister’s face. Miss Mandy stared at her, first with amazement, and then with something very close to hate. At that moment, she hated Gippy, she hated Queen, she hated the world. It was her dearest wish in life to have a child, and now even the physical possibility of it was gone. She was consumed with envy. She had been so good all her life, and loved

the Lord, and He had denied her this simple reward. Yet Queen, immoral, illegitimate, nigra Queen, had been providentially blessed. ‘Me reward for chastity was emptiness, and the wages of sin were glorious. It simply wasn’t fair, and her only defense was to denounce the animal propensities of all blacks.

“Pagans,” she whispered harshly.

Miss Gippy nodded her agreement, a tiny drop of egg yolk dribbling down her chin. She picked up her napkin and wiped it away, entirely satisfied with her morning.

Queen sat on her bed, rocking gently, and keening, pity for her own distress and a lullaby for her unborn child.

She had no alternative now. She had to tell someone, ask someone for help.

But it would not be Davis.

” I warned you,” Joyce said angrily. “Don’t let him get too close, I said!”

“Well, I did!” Queen blazed back. “So there ain’t no point in makin’

speeches about it!”

She turned away, her flash of anger quickly spent and dejection its immediate successor.

“What am I going to do, Joyce?” she cried. Joyce moved quickly to her, and held her.

” Hush, girl, no use cryin’,” she said. “Ain’t no use in cryin’ now.”

But she let Queen cry, and then dried her eyes, and told her it was only proper that Davis should know. It was his baby. She did not understand why Queen was so reluctant. It was unlikely that Davis would hit her, and it was right that he share the burden. Maybe, if they were lucky, Davis would do what he should; certainly he would if Joyce had anything to do with it.

Queen could not explain to Joyce that she was sure Davis would not marry her, because she was scared to admit it to herself. In the end she agreed to tell him, but only if Joyce went with her.

Davis stared at her, and those eyes that she loved so seemed full of reproach. In this she was right, but he was not angry with her. Only with himself.

Joyce was impatient. “She say it’s your’n, and she ain’t a

liar, so what you gwine do about it,” she demanded.

Davis said nothing, and Queen could not bear his silence.

“I’s sorry,” she said, and to her relief and amazement, Davis smiled.

“Guess I’s gwine have to marry you,” he said. Queen closed her eyes, and told her heart to be still, but it would not. When she opened her eyes again, he was still there, and still smiling. She got up, to fly into his arms, but Joyce had a few things to say first.

“Not so fast, missy,” Joyce commanded, and Queen stayed where she was.

Joyce turned her attention to Davis.

“She weren’t gwine tell you, coz she didn’t want to force you to marry her,” Joyce told him, to Queen’s surprise. She had not told Joyce this, Joyce had guessed.

“But she don’t want you if yo’ jus’ marryin’ her coz you must,” Joyce continued. “She don’t want you if’n you don’t love her.” Queen hadn’t told Joyce this either, but it was close to the truth.

The smile had faded from Davis’s lips. He listened to what Joyce had to say, and then turned and looked out of the window at the moonlight on the river. He could not lie; he could only tell them the truth. He adored Queen; he respected her and admired her. He thought she was the dearest thing he had ever met, filled up with love, and she deserved a fine man, and boundless happiness. By rights, that man should be him. The child was his, and Queen loved him. He would fulfill his duty, and marry her, if that was what she wanted, for he couldn’t bear to think of her raising his child in this dark world on her own. But if loving her was the test, then he failed, and he could only be honest.

“I don’t know if I loves you,” he said. “I don’t think I know what love is.”

He saw the sadness wash into Queen’s eyes, and guilt attacked his conscience. He could not do this to her.

“But if’n I’s gonna find out from anyone, I reckon it’s you,” he said. “And I will try and love you.”

The effect on Queen was miraculous, and it seemed to satisfy Joyce.

“I surely hope so,” she said. “Coz if’n you don’t, if you don’t look after this

child and cherish her like she deserves, I

will come fo' you wherever you are, and I'll fix you so you cain't never give any go' girl a baby again."

She stressed her point, to be sure that he understood.

"Y'know I will," she said.

"I know y'will," Davis agreed.

Joyce had done as much as she could. She looked at Queen.

"Now you c'n go to him," she said. And when she saw the love shining out of Queen's eyes, her heart melted. Queen moved into Davis's arrns, and he held her close to him, and hated himself for what he had done.

Queen stayed with him that night, and they made their plans. Davis said he would do whatever she wanted, and they could stay if that was her wish, but he thought the sisters would make things difficult, that Queen's condition would offend them, and they would sack either or both of them. It was better they go somewhere else.

For himself, he did not want to give up on all his plans. He'd always wanted to go North, because if there was any future for black people, it was there. And they should go soon, before the sisters found out, and while they still had the chance to set up a new life before the child was born.

"Anywhere," Queen told him. "Anywhere in the whole wide world that you want to go, I will go with you."

Then she laughed, and corrected herself. "We will go with you.

Davis put his hand on her stomach. He couldn't feel anything but the warmth

of her flesh, and he envied the child, cozy and safe inside her, secure from the travails of the world. Just for a moment, he regretted that he had ever been born.

“Don’t love me too much,” he whispered. “All I ever do is make people cry.”

But his warning came too late. She loved him too much already.

They would leave on Thursday. It was her afternoon off, and would arouse no suspicion from the sisters. He would leave work early, saying he had to buy plants, and would meet her at the coach depot.

The change in Queen was blatantly apparent to Miss Mandy, but she attributed it to the wrong reason. She thought Queen’s

radiant happiness was due to her pregnancy, and her envy of her servant’s condition magnified. She wanted to confront Queen, call her the baggage that she was, and kick her out, and that animal man with her, and she begged the Lord for forgiveness of her sin. To her surprise, the Lord answered her prayer, and her jealousy gave way to her blissful realization that soon she would have a little baby in the house, to love as her own. From then on, her happiness rivaled Queen’s, and she was solicitous to Queen, and constantly on guard for her welfare, while still not admitting that she knew the child was coming.

But the baby was not the only reason for Queen’s mood. Much as she already loved the tiny thing, her real joy came from the fact that soon the child would have a proper home in which to be born and to grow and to be loved, and a mother and father to do that loving, which she had never had. It did not matter that Davis did not love her as much as she loved him. He loved her more than anyone else had ever done.

On Thursday afternoon, she packed a few things in a small case, and waited until the sisters went to their rooms for their afternoon nap. She crept down the stairs and into the kitchen, and let herself out by the back door.

She saw Davis working in the front garden, and waved to him happily, but did not go to him in case either of the sisters was looking out of the window. She left by the back gate, and walked quickly down the lane, and again down another lane, until she was a few blocks from the house. She sat on a park bench at peace with the world, until she heard the clatter of horses' hooves that signaled the approaching streetcar.

She went to Joyce's house to say goodbye. Joyce gave her a small posy of flowers, and wished her well. The women hugged, and cried together for a while, tears of happiness and loss. They sat in the rockers and talked of nothing until it was time to leave.

Queen made her way to the coach depot, and got there early. She waited patiently for Davis, and she was never sure exactly when she knew he wasn't coming. Nor was she exactly sure when she realized that she had always known he wasn't going to come. Perhaps that was why she had been scared to tell him about the baby.

Perhaps she had known it when she did tell him, and had seen that look of reproach in his eyes, that she now understood had not been directed at herself. Perhaps she had known it when they lay together and made their plans, and he told her of his ambition to go North. He had included her then because he felt that he had to, but now she thought it had been his way of telling her he was leaving.

She wasn't angry with him; she was angry with herself for being foolish enough to dream that she could bind him to her. There was something he had to do with his life that precluded her and a child, and it was important to him, and because it was important to him, it was important to her.

And anyway, she had a part of him, growing inside her, the best of him. All that mattered to her now was his child.

She left the little posy that Joyce had given her on a seat at the depot.

If by chance she Vas wrong, and he had been delayed, he would see the posy if he came to the depot, and would know it was from her, and would know where to find her.

She didn’t realize she had waited for him for five hours past his appointed time.

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Queen gasped at the shock of the pain again, pushed as hard as she could, to Miss Mandy’s naive instructions, and grabbed on to the bedposts for leverage. It had been going on for some hours, the contractions coming with increasing frequency, and the birth was imminent. It was as well, for Queen felt as if she were trying to push a giant watermelon through her loins.

Past all inhibition, she yelled to the rafters. Miss Mandy shouted at her, but happily, for she was in her element.

Miss Gippy was leaning against the wall in a state of shock, muttering for guidance from Jesus, trying to block her ears to Queen’s cries, and uselessly insisting that they fetch help. No

one heard her. Miss Mandy was determined to bring the child, which she had already come to think of as her own, into the world herself, and Queen had no other thought than to see him safely delivered.

Queen had not been devastated by the loss of Davis for she thought it inevitable. She was angry because he had not been brave enough to tell her the truth. She missed him, she was lonely, but mostly she was scared for the future.

She had dreaded the scene she knew must happen with the sisters when they were told of her plight and her condition. She had gone to Joyce for advice, and both agreed that Miss Mandy and Miss Gippy were her best chance. Joyce did suggest one other alternative, but getting rid of her baby was inconceivable to Queen, as Joyce knew it would be. Queen had never had anything that was truly her own before. Some clothes, which were usually other people's hand-me-downs, and a few trinkets, most of which she had misplaced. But the child inside her was hers, not to be shared with anyone, not even, now, with Davis. The baby was part of her body and all of her love, and the only person who could ever take him away from her was him. She didn't know what she would do if her baby didn't love her; it didn't even enter her thinking, for she could not imagine that he would not.

Joyce had gone with her to the sisters, and had told them the news. The reaction was exactly predictable, at least at first.

"A wicked, naughty girl, that's what you are!" Miss Mandy told her. She'd been wanting to say it for some time, but had refrained because she didn't want to lose Queen, wasn't prepared to risk Queen's running away before the child was born. Now that Queen was safe with them, for the term of her pregnancy at least, Miss Mandy gave full flood to her moral rectitude, chorused by her sister.

"A sinner damned to hell," Miss Gippy triumphed. "The seventh commandment!

"

Joyce protested Queen's innocence, but Miss Mandy had other plans for her.

"How dare you speak to me like that." She glared at Joyce.

"I'll speak to you any way I wants, you dried-up ol' prune," Joyce responded as angrily, playing fight into Miss

Mandy's hands. "This chile need help, not yo' sermons."

This was heresy to Miss Gippy. What was a sermon but a path to divine assistance? She ordered Joyce out of the house, but Miss Mandy was more careful. Where was Queen to get this help, if not from them? It fell to the sisters to bear the burden of Queen's sin.

Queen was curiously detached from it all, and played no part in the proceedings. Her mind was remembering Davis and thinking of her son. The sisters might very well throw her out. Miss Gippy was intent on it, although Miss Mandy was less determined. If they did throw her out, she would survive. She had a little money saved, and Joyce would help.

"I'll take her with me," Joyce told Miss Mandy, and it was as good as done to Miss Gippy.

"Out of the house, the pair of you," she commanded again. Queen accepted the order, and moved toward the door with Joyce, but a still small voice stopped them.

" Not so fast," Miss Mandy said softly. "There are other things to consider here."

Everyone looked at her, and she looked at Miss Gippy.

"Such as the child's immortal soul," she said. "Queen is lost to us; all the prayers in Christendom could not save her now. But the child is something else."

A clear, shining path to Jesus revealed itself to Miss Gippy. Allow the little children to come unto me. They would allow the unborn babe to come to Him; indeed, they would push him along. They would take him by the hand and deliver him to Calvary. It was why they had come South, to save the souls of the innocents.

"A precious burden," she whispered, in awe of the inspiration. "An innocent babe."

Miss Mandy turned to Joyce. "I will not let the child go into your care,"

she said. "He needs the advantage of a proper Christian upbringing."

Joyce was still angry with her. "I's Christian," she affinned, but Miss Gippy,

stirred by true missionary zeal, shouted about paganism, and heathenism and false prophets, which made Joyce even angrier.

“I ain’t lettin’ her stay,” she snapped, but Miss Mandy was ruthlessly reasonable.

in our care, “How will you stop it? Queen is in our employ’ and I doubt that the allthOTities would consider you more suitable than we are. And where would she find another job, in her condition?”

It was inarguable. Whoever these authorities were, secular or religious, they would undoubtedly be sympathetic to a white woman of faultless civic standing, and would scarcely listen to the pleadings of a black, no matter how reasonable. It was also logical. As generous as Joyce was, she and Abram did not have the physical room or the financial resources to care for Queen for an extended period of time. They would have found a way, but it would have been hard for them, and Queen would indeed have trouble getting another job. So while Joyce still resisted the sisters, it was less stubbornly now.

“She ain’t stayin’,” Joyce said, without conviction.

“I have to,” Queen said quietly.

It was the simple truth, and everyone breathed a small, silent sigh of relief.

“A fairly graceless response, Queen,” Miss Mandy chided, entirely satisfied with it. She laid down her rules. Queen would continue to work for them as her condition allowed, and would be paid, and given her board and lodging. She would be well looked after and given whatever medical help and advice was necessary. When the child came, Queen would continue her employment. Miss Mandy asked only one thing in return, that Queen forsake her rowdy, nigra church, and worship with the sisters. Joyce tried to protest, but lamely, and Queen agreed to the terms. Joyce was told to leave, and it was indicated that she was not welcome in the house anymore, although Queen could continue to see

her occasionally, as a friend. Joyce said a private goodbye to Queen, assuring her of any help she needed, and an alternative sanctuary if conditions with the sisters became intolerable, and left. Miss Mandy sent Queen to her room, for it was already quite late, reminding her that they would have prayers at seven in the morning.

Queen sought simple mercies in her prayers that night. She prayed for Davis, that he be blessed and protected wherever he was, and that he be granted a little happiness. He shouldn't have run away, or at least he should have told her goodbye, but she understood why both were impossible. She asked a

similar blessing and protection for her child, that he be bom whole and complete, and that he come to love her. She asked nothing for herself, except that the old dragons not be too hard on her.

She climbed into bed, missing Davis, missing his protective arms around her, and worrying about where he slept that night, and what the future held in store for him, who had known so much suffering. But he was gone from her now, and someone else needed the attention of her hearL Quietly, sweetly, softly, sadly, she sang the song of her unborn baby.

Miss Mandy sang that song too. Through the weeks and months of Queen's pregnancy, Miss Mandy lived it with her, as if the child had two mothers.

While Miss Gippy expected Queen to fulfill all her household duties, Miss Mandy wanted daily reports as to her welfare and that of the child. She looked to all the mothers at her church for guidance, and fussed about Queen's diet and the baby's health. As Queen's stomach filled and rounded, Miss Mandy insisted on increasingly long periods of rest, and even Miss Gippy joined in the spirit, and cosseted Queen, for the closer Queen came to term, the more Miss Gippy stood in awe and fear of the processes of creation. Queen became quite fond of them-their many attentions made her feel secure, and their delight in imagining the

child as an infant was touching. On the warm summer days Queen would sit in the garden with Miss Mandy, while Miss Gippy fussed with warm, unnecessary rugs and welcome, cool refreshments. They had a new gardener now, an older man, but he came only twice a week, to maintain what Davis had done. It pleased Queen to sit in the pretty arbor, surrounded by the fragrant roses, and survey the handiwork that her man had made.

"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not Charity, it profiteth me nothing."

Miss Mandy was reading from her Bible. Miss Gippy was fussing with a tray.

Prospective motherhood became Queen, and she looked wonderful.

"Charity suffereth long, and is kind. Charity envieth not. Charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up."

It pleased Miss Mandy to sit here on these pleasant afternoons, close to maternity, and she vaunted herself a little, and puffed herself up at her own charity to Queen, which is why she read the good words of instruction, to be delivered from vanity and pride.

"It's getting a little chilly," Miss Gippy said. "Don't you think you should go inside, Queen?"

It was a very hot day. Queen smiled, and Miss Mandy was cross.

"For heaven's sake, Gippy, don't fuss," she told her sister. Miss Gippy was a little put out. She was only thinking of Queen's wellbeing, and the baby's. The way Miss Mandy carried on, anyone would think the child was her own.

"I'm only thinking of the boy," she sniffed, and picked up the tray.

"Why you so sure it's going to be a boy?" Queen wondered, to placate her and include Miss Gippy in a process from which Miss Mandy seemed determined to

exclude her.

Miss Gippy did something very odd. She giggled, and was embarrassed by her own frivolity.

“Well, of course, I don’t know,” she twittered. “How could I know?”

She moved away toward the house.

“Don’t sit out here too long,” she said, to spite Miss Mandy. Queen adjusted her position on the chair. She was almost to term and could never sit comfortably in one position for very long. Miss Mandy put down her Bible and stared at the garden.

“She’s convinced it will be a boy because she wants it to be a boy,” she said quietly. “We both do.”

She wondered why. Men were deceitful, distrustful, and disloyal. Look what her fianc6 had done to her, all those years ago. Look what Davis had done to Queen. Why should she want to bring such a creature into the world? She was honest enough to admit to herself that she adored men, for all their imperfections, and a boy child could be fashioned into the image of a perfect man. A boy child could be made to understand the nature of women, and be kind to them when he grew. He could be schooled not to hurt women, and not to make promises to them that he did not intend to keep. A boy child

could learn of women’s pain, and become the image of the husband she, Mandy, had never had. She did not want to bring a girl child into this world, for who would wish a woman’s life on a poor babe? Yet she knew she would be happy with whatever Queen gave her.

“How does it feel?” Miss Mandy asked quietly.

“Heavy,” Queen said, adjusting her weight again. Miss Mandy was always

asking her how she felt. But presently, Miss Mandy's mind was on other matters. Her thoughts were metaphysical.

"No, I mean how does it feel in your heart?"

Queen considered the question carefully, but it was so difficult to describe the complex emotions that engulfed her. She had never, for one moment, regretted the pregnancy, and when the physical difficulties of it made her irritable or tired, or when she felt ill, or when she couldn't do her work properly, she would sit somewhere, and talk quietly to her child, and would caress her belly so that he would learn the gentle touch of her hands. She wished she were a poet, or had been schooled better, so that she could communicate the pure wonder of it. The only words that came to her were simple ones, but honestly spoken, directly from her heart.

"I feel-full up with him," Queen said. "Complete with love for him." She smiled.

"There now, I think he's going to be a boy, too. I feel him growing inside me, kicking inside me, and I never want him to leave me. No matter how big he gets I will always think he's too little for this world."

Miss Mandy blinked in the sunlight, and glanced at her Bible.

"And now abideth Faith, Hope, and Charity, these three, but the greatest of these is Charity."

They sat in silence for a moment. Bees hummed. Crickets sang. Butterflies danced by.

"I envy you so much," Miss Mandy whispered. Queen looked at the old woman, and felt a surge of sorrow for her, for her aura was abject loneliness. She wanted to give Miss Mandy a gift, in return for the charity she had shown.

She took Miss Mandy's hand and held it against her stomach. They didn't have to wait very long. The child was getting

anxious to be bom. When Miss Mandy felt the movement of the kick against her hand, a golden smile suffused her face, and a sharp pain stabbed her heart. The child kicked again, a slight, dull thump, and Miss Mandy pulled her hand away.

“Don’t make it worse for me,” she said.

So it was perfectly reasonable to Queen that Miss Mandy be her midwife, and in any case Miss Mandy would tolerate no other. Miss Gippy was far from convinced. What if something went wrong? What if the child had problems? And who was going to clean up the mess?

“We’re nearly there!” Miss Mandy cried, and Miss Gippy’s eyes popped out in amazement. Queen had given a shameless yell and an almighty shove, and the head of the baby appeared. Miss Gippy fell to her knees, and prayed for assistance or deliverance.

“Get up off your knees, woman, and get me a towel,” Miss Mandy ordered.

Queen yelled again, and pushed again, and so it was that a child was bom, to three lonely women, who had no experience of such wonder.

“Bless my cotton socks,” Miss Mandy whispered, in awe. “It’s a boy.”

The words lulled Queen, like a benediction. She lay back on the bed, in exhaustion, and elation, and triumph.

“Let me see him,” she said.

Miss Mandy and Miss Gippy were fussing over the tot, doing the things that had to be done.

“In a moment, Queen,” said Miss Mandy. “We have things to do.”

“Let me see him,” Queen said again, but Miss Mandy didn’t even reply. The baby was so darling, and so fragile, and yet she had to be brutal with him, to ensure his survival. She cut the cord herself, and cleaned him, and spanked him to make him cry, so that she was certain he would live.

And there was so much else. She had to make sure he was complete, that all his tiny toes were there and his dear little fingers, that his ears were well formed, and touch his tiny, fluffy hair. And he wasn't really black at all, just a sort of milky coffee, and anyway, perhaps he would tighten a little as he grew. And she had to hold him to her, hold him to her breast, so that he

would know that no matter who fed him, this was where he was loved. What on earth was Queen making such a fuss about?

"He's my baby!" Queen was shouting now. "He's mine. I want to see him."

Every fiber of her was pleading for this part of her body to be returned to her.

"Don't be so ungrateful, Queen," Miss Mandy said sharply. Oh, he looked lovely, wrapped in clean swaddling clothes of palest blue. This was how the darling baby Jesus must have looked, and Miss Mandy's soul magnified the Lord.

"I want my baby!" Queen cried. "Give me my baby!"

Miss Mandy sighed, but came to Queen with the child, for he was whimpering, and might be hungry, and he was never going to be hungry, or want for anything. Miss Mandy would see to that. With matemal care, she put him into Queen's arms at last, and Queen stared at the tiny thing, and vowed she would never let him out of her arms again. She freed her breast, and put the child's mouth to it. Of all the pleasures life can give, this was the finest feeling, for she, who had given him life, was sustaining him. She could not isolate any of the thousand emotions that were punching at her heart, and as she stared at her son, she tried to see his future, and knew she would do everything in her power to make it blessed.

"He's a very fine, very handsome boy," she heard Miss Mandy say, and nodded in agreement. "We must think of a very special name for him."

Queen didn’t even bother to look at Miss Mandy, for the matter was already settled. He would be called David, which meant Beloved.

“I don’t think that’s entirely suitable,” Miss Mandy said. Queen didn’t respond, because there wasn’t anything to say. His name was David, and she was feeding him. She wished the sisters would go away, so that she could be alone with him, and welcome him in private, as mothers should, but Miss Gippy was saying something, about King David, and Bathsheba, and adultery.

“We thought Abner,” Miss Mandy said.

“Abner,” Miss Gippy agreed. “A fine, biblical name.”

Queen was puzzled. This had nothing to do with them. She

was very grateful to the-sisters for their many kindnesses, but the name of the baby was not their business.

“His name is David,” she said.

Miss Mandy thought she was being very difficult. She had taken Queen in, when many might have thrown her onto the streets. She had looked after her and delivered the baby. The very least Queen could do was to let her choose the boy’s name, and yet she seemed insistent on a name that remembered his philandering father. Obviously, Miss Mandy sensibly decided, nothing was to be gained by discussing it now. Queen was tired, and in an emotional state.

Miss Mandy had plenty of time, Abner didn’t have to be christened for several weeks, and Queen would see reason after some rest.

The sisters went about their business, to put sheets and towels in the wash to soak, and then to say their separate private prayers, thanking God for his many blessings, and at last, Queen was left alone with her boy.

He was asleep, safe in her loving arms, and she promised him she would do her best by him, always. She told him how sorry she was that he didn’t have a

pappy, but his pappy had important things to do in the world, and she would be Mammy and Pappy for him.

And then, from somewhere deep in her soul, sweet music flooded forth from her, wordless music that was her lullaby.

Six weeks later, in a simple, private ceremony arranged by the sisters at the Lutheran Church, Queen watched with uplifting pride and listened with a certain ambivalence as the minister sprinkled water on her baby's head and christened him Abner.

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Miss Mandy was trying to steal her baby. Queen was sure of it; there was no other explanation. It hadn't been so obvious in the early days, the first few weeks. There was the trouble over his name, but Queen had not put up too much of a struggle about that. She didn't want to appear ungrateful for everything the sisters had done for her, and if it pleased them to call him Abner, it was only a name. Queen had compromised, in her own mind, that he was Abner David, but as the weeks went on, common usage prevailed, and now he was simply Abner.

From the very beginning Miss Mandy had been obsessive about the boy, worrying about his health, his feeding times, and his food. She asked questions that Queen thought were far too personal, about her diet, to be sure that Abner was getting good milk. She would sit holding him for hours while Queen worked. She talked to him endlessly about Jesus, and told him Bible stories, even though he was too young to hear. She fretted about him if he cried, and rocked him gently when he slept. She even changed his soiled linen.

She would call for Queen when she thought Abner was hungry, and make Queen feed him in front of her, which Queen didn't like. She had protested the first time it happened.

"He's starving, Queen," Miss Mandy said. "Where have you been?"

“Pro’bly just got the burps,” Queen replied. “He been fed. “

Miss Mandy referred to a notepad.

“That was four hours ago,” she said. “I have it written down. “

Abner did seem to be snuggling into Miss Mandy’s breast, as if he were hungry. Queen felt the milk move in her breast.

Miss Mandy tickled Abner’s chin, and made goo-goo eyes at him.

“Poor little baby’s hungry, isn’t he?” she clucked. “Nasty Mammy won’t feed him.”

“I ain’t nasty,” Queen chided. She took Abner and made to leave the room.

“Do it here, Queen,” Miss Mandy ordered. “You know I like to watch.”

Queen knew that. In the first few days, while she was still in bed, Miss Mandy had hardly left her room, fascinated by the boy, everything he did, and everything that was done to him. It hadn’t seemed to matter then, to feed the baby in front of her. It was starting to matter now. She was being allowed less and less time alone with her son.

“‘Tain’t fittin’,” Queen said. “It’s private business ‘tween me and him.”

Miss Mandy laughed. “It can’t do him any harm. And it pleases me.”

Queen, who had been trained all her life to obey orders, did not know how to avoid the instruction. She sat in a chair by the window, opened her blouse and bodice, and took out her breast.

Abner fed happily. Miss Mandy nodded her head as happily, and started to sing a hymn.

It happened every mealtime from then on, except at night, and sometimes even then. Miss Mandy would come into her room, without knocking, to check that Abner was comfortable. She would adjust the blankets in his cot, or make sure he was not wet, or rescue the pacifier she had bought him from the place on the mantelshelf where Queen had put it, and give it to Abner to suck.

She washed him and weighed him. She dressed him in clothes of her own choosing, relegating the few that Queen had bought to the trash. She came home one day with an expensive perambulator, and every afternoon she would take him for a stroll in the garden while Queen worked, chatting to him, or singing hymns. She began to teach him. She would point things out to him, and say the name of them over and over again, and was sure his gurgles signified recognition. Sometimes she would take him in the pram for longer walks,

down the street, to introduce him to the new, wider world that awaited him. She did all the things a mother would do, and left very little for Queen.

Sometimes Queen protested, and then Miss Mandy would look aggrieved, and say that she was only trying to keep Abner happy while Queen was working.

Queen's work was the excuse for everything, and Queen thought they deliberately found more things for her to do to keep her away from her baby.

Queen grieved for her lost hours with her son. What she had thought would be hers, and hers alone, was hardly hers at all. Except at night, when Miss Mandy had gone to bed, and then Queen would take her child from his cot, and lie on her bed holding him to her, trying to make up for all the time she had missed.

Curiously, Queen thought that Miss Gippy was on her side. Miss Gippy was quite fond of Abner, but his crying distressed her. She often complained of being wakened in the night. On several occasions she suggested that Miss Mandy

should give the boy to his mother. Sometimes when she came into the kitchen to tell Queen that Miss Mandy wanted Abner fed, or be looked after in some way, Queen would say it had been done, or that she was busy, and Miss Gippy seemed to understand.

"I know," she said, "but you'd better go see what she wants." She, not Abner.

On one occasion, Miss Gippy had told Miss Mandy that she was spending too much time with Abner, and was neglecting her prayers and Bible studies.

Miss Mandy was angry then, and told Miss Gippy she didn't know what she was talking about. Then she had even wept, and said that no one understood what she was trying to do for the boy.

As Abner grew, the situation became worse. What was most difficult for Queen to accept was that Abner seemed to prefer Miss Mandy to her. For all the attention she gave the boy, Miss Mandy seldom disciplined him.

If he was fretful and crying, Miss Mandy would get irritated with him, and call for Queen. It was Queen who had to introduce Abner to the word I I no," not Miss Mandy. Because Queen was so often tired from her work, she said "no" to Abner rather more than she

wanted, even though he was too little to fully understand the word. Miss Mandy made jokes about it.

"Be careful, Abner," she would say, "or I'll send for nasty Mammy."

Queen lost her temper.

"I ain't nasty," she flared, not for the first time. "An' why don't you let me decide what's best for my boy?"

"Because you don't have a very strong sense of responsibility, Queen," Miss Mandy replied smugly. "If you did, Abner wouldn't be here, would he?"

Slowly it dawned on Queen that Abner always laughed and looked happy when he was with Miss Mandy, and was always whimpering and difficult when he was with Queen. It was more than she could bear, On her afternoons off, Queen was allowed to take Abner with her on short walks about the garden or down the back lane, but never into the streets or into town, if Queen had to go shopping. Queen wanted to take Abner farther afield, to the park, to be in the open air with her son, and had put him in the pram once, but Miss Mandy stopped that.

“I cannot have you parading the proof of your sin in public, Queen,” she said.

“You parade him!” Queen shouted. “You take him everywhere! “

“That’s different,” Miss Mandy said. “He isn’t my sin. I am saving his soul.”

That salvation was more like thievery, and that was when Queen decided Miss Mandy was trying to steal her baby from her. She became frenetic with Abner, clutching him to her in her room, hugging him, holding him, whispering to him, begging him, desperate for some proof that he loved her.

It disturbed the boy, and made him cry even more. Queen was distressed because.she didn’t understand what she had done to make him cry so, and would shout at him. Sometimes Miss Mandy heard her, and came in to see what the fuss was about. Then Abner would stretch out his arms to Miss Mandy and cry to go to her, and when she took him he would quiet down. On more than one occasion, Miss Mandy threatened to move Abner’s cot into her room if Queen couldn’t look after him better. They would argue about that, and Queen would shout

at Miss Mandy, and that made Abner cry even more.

Yet sometimes, when she was not so tired, she would sing lullabies to him, and he would smile and laugh at his mother, and stretch out his tiny hand to her face, squeeze her nose gently, or pull on her hair, and it was sweet and lovely to

her.

She had to talk to someone about what was happening, but had few friends.

She never went to her own church, by agreement with the sisters, and seldom saw Joyce, as the sisters had commanded. Now she missed Davis. If he had stayed, she would not be in this predicament; he would have put Miss Mandy in her place. Or if they had run away together, Miss Mandy would be only a distant memory. Now she realized the depth of her love for Davis, for any kind of life with him was preferable to any kind of life without him, for the sake of their son. Now she was angry with Davis, for the boy needed a father. He had mothers enough.

She went to Joyce. It had been three months since they had met. Joyce hadn't changed, and was delighted to see Queen. Her warm, motherly embrace brought all of Queen's frustrations wrenching to the surface, and she held on to her friend for dear life, and wept. Joyce was astonished at the flood.

"Chile, chile, whatever's wrong?" she comforted. Queen gulped away her tears, and told Joyce the sad story.

"I ain't his mammy no more," she cried.

Joyce calmed her down, and stroked her hair.

"You gotta tell her, girl," she advised. "She cain't steal yo' baby. "

"That's what she's doin'," Queen agreed.

They talked it through, and Joyce decided Queen must leave the sisters'

employ, and find another job. She could come and stay with Joyce and her family. Queen resisted mildly, for she knew she and Abner would be a burden, but Joyce would have none of it. They were welcome for as long as they needed. So Queen agreed,

"I'm leavin', quittin'," she told Miss Mandy, who was nursing Abner. "Me an' Abner's goin'."

It was a wonderful moment. She thought she saw fear in Miss Mandy’s eyes.

Miss Gippy, who was reading her Bible, looked up in surprise.

“And why is that?” Miss Mandy asked carefully.

“Coz you tryin’ to steal my baby from me,” Queen snapped, believing her case to be impeccable, and delighted to be having her say at last.

But the fear she had seen in Miss Mandy’s eyes was replaced by something else, something more like relief.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Miss Mandy said.

“I ain’t ridiculous!” Queen answered. “I never gets to see him no more, he’s always with you. You wash him, change him, play with him, take him out. You’d feed him if you could, only you’s all dried up so you cain’t!

”

And the relief was replaced by a flash of anger.

“So we’s leaving,” Queen said again.

“I can’t imagine you’ll find another job very easily.” Miss Mandy seemed almost calm.

“I don’t need another job; friends is lookin’ after me.” Queen was defiant, but a little unsettled.

“Joyce, no doubt,” Miss Mandy guessed, and knew from the look on Queen’s face that she was right,

“If you leave our employ after all we have done for YOU,she said, “I shall go to the authorities and have you declared unfit to be a mother.”

Queen reddened. She was frightened of the authorities. It was the chink in her armor, for her earliest training was her downfall. As a slave, she'd seen that white Massas had all the authority they needed. She wasn't certain that anything had changed. "They wouldn't do that," she said,

"Oh, yes, they would," Miss Mandy told her. "Look at it from their point of view. You would be walking out on a good, well-paid job, and taking your illegitimate son from a safe and secure home, where he is loved and provided for, to bring him up in shantytown. All because you have some silly idea that I am trying to steal him from you."

Queen shifted uncertainty. It didn't sound so simple when it was put like that.

"Because you stealin' him!" she insisted.

Any charity that Miss Mandy had ever felt toward the black race seemed to disappear for a moment.

"Why would I want to steal your nigger baby?" she asked, steel in her eyes. "I am white. Or had you forgotten?"

Queen was horrified, believing what she was told. No white authority was going to listen to her side of the case, and all authority was white.

"Now I suggest you go to your room, and forget all this silly nonsense about leaving," Miss Mandy said. She sat, and cooed at Abner. Queen moved forward to take the boy, but Miss Mandy held on to him.

"Abner can stay with me for a while," she said.

Queen was almost blind with impotent rage. All she could see was her darling son in the white woman's arms. She ran forward and grabbed Abner from her.

"You give me my baby," she shrieked. "You cain't have him! I'll kill you

first!”

The vehemence of it shocked both sisters, and Miss Gippy hissed in disbelief.

“Harlot. Jezebel,” she murmured, but for the moment, Queen had won. She ran from the room, clutching Abner to her.

She sat on the floor of her room rocking Abner in her arms, desperately calling to God for some answer to her distress. She’d lighted a little fire to keep them warm, and was staring at the flames of it, and the flames licked and danced in her mind, and reminded her of other awful fires, at other times, in other places.

The door burst open, and Miss Mandy swept in, followed by Miss Gippy.

They ignored Queen, and went to Abner’s cot.

“I haye decided to move Abner into my room,” Miss Mandy told Queen. “Take that end, Gippy.”

The sisters moved to the cot, and Queen jumped to her feet.

“You leave that be!” she cried.

“I believe it is best for Abner,” Miss Mandy said calmly. “You are a fallen woman and he can’t stay with you. It puts his soul in danger.”

“Harlot. Jezebel,” Miss Gippy hissed again. She had been deeply shocked by Queen’s outburst downstairs, and any sympathy she had for Queen’s plight had disappeared at that moment.

Queen begged the sisters not to be so cruel, but Miss Mandy was adamant, and called her hysterical. If Queen did not con-

trol herself, Miss Mandy would call on the authorities first thing in the morning and tell them Queen was mentally unbalanced. She had a witness, Miss Gippy, who had heard Queen threaten to kill her.

“The sixth commandment,” Miss Gippy chimed in.

It was true. At that moment, Queen was mentally unbalanced. And the flames of the fire, the flames of her torment, lighted some dark comer in her mind. The only way to escape fire was to run away from it. She calmed herself, and seemed to accept what Miss Mandy was telling her. But she asked to be allowed to have this last night with Abner. Faced with an apparently more rational Queen, Miss Mandy relented. The sisters left the room.

Queen stared at the fire again. The flames glittered in her eyes, in her mind, frightening her but making her determined on survival. She would run away from the fire. She would run away from the sisters. She would take Abner with her to someplace where no one would ever find them, and they would be safe.

There was nowhere in Huntsville. She couldn’t go to Joyce, for the sisters would hear of it, and find her, and take Abner away from her. She couldn’t even tell Joyce that she was going, for Joyce might try to talk her into staying.

South, perhaps. Everyone expected nigras to go North, so maybe if Queen went South no one would find her. But exactly where. she would go was a decision for later. She had a little money in her purse, saved from her wages. They could go anywhere. The most important thing was to get away.

She was sly as any vixen. She turned down her lamp, so that Miss Mandy might think she was asleep. She put Abner in his cot and lay on her bed, and waited until the distant clock struck two, and she was sure the sisters were asleep.

She turned up her lamp a little so that she could just see. She put a few things for herself and Abner into a bag, and wrapped the boy in a blanket.

Quietly as she could, she opened her door. The house was dark and silent.

She walked carefully, Abner on one arm, her bag and her shoes in the other hand. She crept softly down the stairs into the hall. The front door was in front of her. They were only yards from freedom.

A floor board creaked. Queen froze, but Abner stirred in her arms.

"Hush now, chile," Queen whispered. "You love yo' mammy, you hush, you hear?"

Miraculously, Abner heard his mammy, and hushed.

When she was sure no one had awakened, Queen moved slowly to the front door. She turned the key in the lock with infinite patience, trying to avoid the merest squeak.

She opened the door, stepped out into the night, and softly pulled the door shut again. She walked more quickly now, but still with caution, across the veranda, down the steps, and onto the lawn, avoiding the gravel path. Quicker again, across the lawn and to the front gate. She opened the gate, moved out of the property, and began to run.

She ran in her stocking feet, as fast as she could, weighed down by her child and her case. At the end of the street her shoes fell to the ground, and she stopped for a moment to slip them on.

Then she ran again, and ran and ran, until she was panting for breath, but she would not stop. Abner was awake now, and burbling happily at the unexpected adventure.

As she ran, she whispered joyously to her boy.

"We free!" she told him, in triumph. "We free!"

But she kept on running, away, into the night.

Free.

Although Queen went South, she wanted to avoid Decatur, and she took the easterly road and crossed the river at Guntersville. Anxious to conserve her small purse of money, she slept where she could, in barns and outhouses. Sometimes she asked at farms for shelter, and sometimes she was invited in and fed, or allowed to sleep in the milking shed and have good, fresh, creamy milk for Abner.

Abner, fat and healthy, throve on the wandering life. Now that his mother was his only constant friend, he came to depend on her, to need her, and to adore her. At last he gave her the return of love that she so sorely needed, and had come so close to losing to Miss Mandy.

Poorly dressed but cheerfully optimistic, she encountered occasional hostility from whites, but nothing she was not used to, simply a casual intolerance of free blacks, aud every small act of discrimination was repaid by another of some small courtesy.

She was fascinated by the difference in attitude to her that she encountered. When she had been traveling by herself, she had been perceived as an unlikely white woman, trash or mulatta, and ignored by many whites, reviled by some blacks. Having Abner on her hip defined her.

Clearly the mother of the darker-skinned child, she no longer looked definably white herself, and many took pity on her because of her baby.

Farmers in carts on their way to market would stop for her, and give her a ride to their destination, or to their homes, where their wives would welcome her. She might even work for them for a few days, to repay their generosity, and was sometimes rewarded with a few pennies for her pocket, as well as her keep.

The gossip that she heard intrigued her. She was told extraordinary stories of the black determination to take Washington at its reconstructing word, and grab for equality. She heard of strikes by city workers, or by field hands protesting their pay. She heard of riots and even small arrnbd rebellions against civic authorities who were reluctant to put the new Federal laws into effect. She heard one story of an overseer in Georgia being forced off his rice plantation by the hands, who would not work for him. Queen hardly believed the story, and laughed, because she could not imagine Henderson being forced off The Forks of Cypress by the slaves.

She was offered friendly advice and told to avoid the larger cities, where segregation was rampant. Generally, she learned, the attitude of urban Southemers; toward the blacks was even less benevolent than before the war, although a few civic leaders had publicly devoted themselves to the black cause. Whenever anyone asked her where she was going, she became

vague, and murmured something about finding her husband in the South.

Often, when she was alone, she asked herself where she was going, and what she would do with her life, because she knew she couldn't roam forever.

Her faith kept her going, and she had the absolute conviction that God was directing her footsteps, and would bring her, surely and safely, to her promised land. Abner was her dear companion, and his company assuaged her on those few lonely nights when even her spirit failed her, and she questioned herself, and her travels, and her life.

It was her inconclusive story of her missing husband, told to a cheerful, militant ostler and his family, that gave her news of a man who might be Davis.

There was a trade-union leader, she heard, a fine and passionate orator, who had some skill as a blacksmith, and who was dedicated to the cause of black equality. He -went around the country making passionate speeches about the rights of blacks, and had been in Gadsden, where she was now, and he had

persuaded some restaurant workers to form a guild. He had moved on, but her hosts were not sure where. Georgia, they thought, to the low country. He had often talked of the appalling conditions on the plantations there.

Queen hardly slept that night, her mind full of Davis. It all fitted in: He had learned smithy skills from Abram, and had forged his convictions about the circumstances of the newly freed blacks at the anvil. He had tried to talk Abram into forming a guild in Huntsville, and had the internal fire of a fine speaker. There was a chance that it was not Davis, but her need for some direction in her life, and her need for him, were so great that she could not allow herself to doubt. If he had found his mission in life, he would surely have room for her.

At last she had a goal and a destination. She would go to Georgia, and find Davis.

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The day was unbearably hot, stiflingly humid. The coach rattled and creaked over the rough road, the horses sweating, and the almost useless springs unable to ease the bonecrunching ride. Every stone or furrow made the coach jolt and jerk, jarring Queen's bones. Abner, in her arms, was fretful, crying constantly, and Queen prayed for the journey to be over. She was traveling on the box with Micah, the coachman, and with one hand she held on to the small rail, to stop herself from being thrown to the ground, and with the other clung to Abner.

She yelled at Micah to slow down, but he only grinned a toothy grin, and lashed the horses. Queen began to wonder if he was driving her to hell. It was hot enough.

Mrs. Benson, her Missy, was inside the coach with her husband and her baby boy, William, to whom Queen was nanny and wet nurse. The oppressive heat of the South Carolina low country caused Mrs. Benson as much distress as Queen. Although she rode in slightly greater comfort, the tight stays and heavy petticoats, the formal dress and elaborate bonnet that her position in society demanded, caused her to curse this inhospitable land, and she longed for the cooler mountains of Georgia, which were her home.

She did not regret her decision to accompany her husband, for he had important work to do, and she was a good wife. She believed in his cause, and always stood by his side. They had been on the road for several days, but at least the nightmare journey was nearly over. They would reach their destination by late afternoon, and perhaps the hotel would be halfway decent, and William would get a good night's sleep. The journey was making her infant son fractious, but he couldn't possibly be hungry, Queen had fed him when they

stopped for lunch only an hour ago. She gave a small prayer of thanks that Queen had been sent to her, and stared out at the depressing landscape.

They were passing through flat farmland, edged by scrubby vegetation. The fields were untended, and empty of farm hands. The world seemed deserted, and Queen began to think they were traveling nowhere, endlessly moving, suspended in time.

A small line of field hands appeared on the horizon, walking in the same direction. The coach lessened the distance between them, and Queen could hear the men singing lustily, a work song. As the coach passed by, the men cheered Micah and Queen, and called out for food, or money, but Micah did not slow down.

Mr. Benson put down his newspaper and looked out at the men.

"Scum," he said, almost to himself, and Mrs. Benson, distracted by the heat and William, nodded absentmindedly. She always agreed with her husband.

"Where they goin'T' Queen asked Micah.

"Beaufort. Same as us," Micah told her. "Dey on strike."

Queen turned back to look at the men. She had never seen a striker before, black or white, but they looked no different from other men. She felt a thrill of excitement because she could equate the little she knew of strikes with the little she knew of Davis, and hoped that he might be one of the men. But he was not.

“Why they strike?” she asked Micah again.

“Money.” Micah grinned his toothy grin. “Dey sick of workin’ for pennies, to make dere Massa rich. Dey want better pay - “

Micah spoke in a thick, old-time, slave dialect, which fooled many people into thinking he was ignorant. In fact, he was a knowledgeable man, and took a keen interest in the world. His position with the Bensons made him privy to a broad spectrum of news. He knew exactly why they were going to Beaufort.

They were some distance ahead of the strikers now, and Queen craned her head back to see them.

“I ain’t never heard of it,” she said, her voice taking on some of Micah’s dialect, which was reassuring to her. “Black folk, on strike.”

“I don’t like it, Missy Queen.” Micah grinned again. “Gwine be trouble.”

Queen could not imigine what trouble he meant, for she had no experience of trade unions and bosses, only slaves and Massas. All she wanted to do was find Davis.

She had heard of him again, in a small town south of Atlanta, this charismatic union man who could fashion a horse’s shoe as well as any blacksmith. She asked if anyone knew where he was, but heard only guesses that it might be the low country. Unions, she was told, were sorely needed in the low country; there had been trouble there since the end of the war.

She kept traveling east, and everywhere she went she asked about him, but heard no more, but she did hear stories of constant racial trouble in the coastal rice-growing districts.

A farmer had given her a lift into a country town near the Georgia border with South Carolina, and Queen sat in the pretty square for a while, not quite sure where to go next. It was the middle of the day, and she asked Abner if he was hungry, because she was. Abner, staring at a flock of crows in the trees, gurgled agreement. There was a general store across the road with a caf6 attached to it. Queen went to it, and looked for a back entrance, but could find none. She went inside, The store was large, but gloomy. The shelves were stocked with produce and provisions, and there was an eating area for whites, a few tables, with not very clean clothes. A welldressed woman was sitting at one of the tables, trying to feed warm milk to a baby on her knee. Queen went to the counter.

“Where c’n I eat?” she asked the server.

He looked at her in mild surprise, and then saw Abner, and understood.

“Niggers in back,” he said, nodding to the back of the store. Queen began walking there, but the woman at the table spoke, sharply and clearly.

“She may sit here, with me.”

The server was alarmed, but he could tell from the woman’s accent and attitude that she was not to be trifled with.

“Ma’am, she cain’t,” he said. “She’s nigra.”

“We are all equal now. Or had you not heard?” the woman

said to the server, but Queen didn’t think she sounded generous. The woman turned to Queen. “Come here, girl.”

Like the server, Queen was not anxious to argue with the woman. Very few people, she was to discover later, ever did, and anyway, Queen was intrigued.

She walked to the woman’s table. The woman examined her carefully, and Abner.

” Extraordinary,” she said. ” If it were not for the child—

Queen knew she meant that no one would guess her color. She felt quite pleased. The woman picked up a menu.

“What will you have?” she said. “There’s-”

Queen thought she might fight back a little, so that this imperious woman did not get the wrong impression of her.

“I c’n read,” she said. The woman smiled, passed her the menu, and invited her to sit. She turned her attention to her own baby, and Queen sneaked a few glances at her, over the menu. The woman looked up, and caught Queen’s stare. Queen dropped her eyes to the menu, and the woman smiled to herself.

“How old is he?” she asked of Abner.

“Ten months,” Queen said.

“Is he weaned?”

Queen was shocked. She thought it a very personal question for such a short acquaintance, and she shook her head. The woman nodded, and thought for a moment.

“I don’t suppose you’re looking for a job?” she asked Queen, who wasn’t sure how to reply. She could use the money, but she wanted to find Davis.

“I’s going North,” she responded ambivalently.

“This would only distract you for a while,” the woman said. “A few weeks at most, until I get back to Atlanta. I cannot feed my boy, William.”

She smiled at the baby on her lap, and put a spoon of warm milk to his mouth.

“I have a wet nurse,” the woman continued, “but she’s uppity, and her milk’s a little sour. Anyway, William doesn’t like it. I pay quite well.”

Queen was astonished by her frankness, and found herself attracted to it, She was wary of employers, but the presence of the boy child alleviated some of her caution. Some, but not

all. She thought about it for a moment. If the woman paid well, she could save some money, and if she was only wanted for a few weeks, it would not unreasonably delay her search for Davis. She was tempted to say yes, but had to be careful.

"'Scuse me for asking, maam," she said politely. "But is you very religious?"

The wornan thought the question impertinent, but liked Queen's spirit.

"It's none of your business, but yes, I believe in the Lord."

That worried Queen.

"Is you on a mission to black folk? Savin' their souls?" she inquired carefully.

ne woman was incredulous. She stared at Queen for a moment, and then laughed, in open derision.

"I don't believe you nigras have souls," she said.

That was a considerable relief to Queen. She understood people who thought like that-she had been brought up with them-and she preferred that attitude to Miss Mandy's missionary zeal. She laughed with the woman, but for different reasons.

"That's all right," she said. "We could work for you. Fo' a little while."

"Good," the woman said, puzzled by her, or at least by her laughter. "I think I'm pleased. I am Mrs. Benson. Can you start immediately? We are traveling to Beaufort, and have stopped for lunch."

Queen agreed that she could, and gave her name. Mrs. Benson sent her to the nigra tables, telling Queen to order what she liked, she would pay for it.

Queen was pleased, and as she walked to the back of the store, she whispered to Abner that they had just got lucky.

Mrs. Benson was pleased too; it solved a very difficult problem. She had not told Queen the exact truth. A wet nurse, Plick, had been with her when they started out from Atlanta, but she didn't have one now. Plick had a six-month baby of her own, and was difficult, uppity, forever making speeches about the new equality of blacks, and demanding her rights. William didn't like her. Nor did Mr. Benson, who had demanded her dismissal. It had all come to a head that morning,

and Plick had left in high dudgeon, leaving Mrs. Benson stranded in the middle of nowhere with an eight-month-old baby to feed. The situation was so desperate that Mrs. Benson thought she might have to desert her husband, even though he needed her sorely, and return to Atlanta. She'd come to the caf6 to be alone while her husband met with some associates, and this white creature had come in with an unweaned, nigra child, and was looking for a job.

"The Lord moves in mysterious ways," Mrs. Benson said to William.

William was completely satisfied with the new arrangement, and snuggled happily to Queen's breast before they resumed their journey. Abner wasn't jealous, Mrs. Benson was pleased, Micah was friendly to Queen, and Mr.

Benson ignored her. The only unpleasant thing was the humidity, which was completely enervating. Shortly before they reached Beaufort, two days later, a blessed rain shower cleared the air, but it was still hot.

As they rode into the town, Queen began to share some of Micah's apprehension, for there was an atmosphere of tension and potential violence. Small groups of strikers stood on street comers, singing and chanting, and shouting their grievances. Other groups of white men harangued them, and once a scuffle broke out between the two groups. A couple of armed sheriffs ignored the fray. Beyond that the streets were deserted, as if the good citizens of the town were staying inside, to avoid trouble, or perhaps the weather.

Micah guided the coach to the hotel, which appeared deserted, but as soon as they arrived bellhops came running out to handle the luggage. Micah helped Queen and Abner down from the box, while Mr. Benson jumped out and went to greet a couple of businessmen who had come out of the hotel.

Queen and Micah helped Mrs. Benson and William from the carriage, and Mrs. Benson looked at the town.

She didn't seem impressed by what she saw, but gave William to Queen, squared her shoulders, and organized the bellhops, calling out instructions for the luggage. There were some shouts from across the street, and another fight. Two black strikers were beating up a white redneck, and again, no one interfered.

Mr. Benson watched the fight, and seemed to be appraising the situation.

As he turned back to his associates, he caught Queen's eye, and she shivered, for the look on his face frightened her. He said something to his friends, and then told Mrs. Benson to see the rooms while he talked with his friends. The men walked away, deep in conversation. Mrs. Benson told Queen to come along, and swept into the hotel, which was the best the town had to offer. Queen, carrying Abner and William, followed.

Inside, the manager himself greeted Mrs. Benson, and the fon-nalities of checking in were quickly attended to. The manager led the way upstairs, Queen followed with the boys, and Micah, who was directing the bellhops, and Queen

began to think that Mrs. Benson must be a very important lady.

The suite was spacious, a sitting room and two bedrooms. Mrs. Benson came into it with the retinue of staff and the obsequious manager, who was telling her how splendid the rooms were. Mrs. Benson was not impressed, and the heat made her tetchy. Queen waited to be told what to do, and Abner began to cry.

"If these are your best, they'll have to do," she told the unhappy manager, "but they're not what we're used to." She looked into the master bedroom.

"Our finest suite, ma'am," he insisted, but Mrs. Benson ignored him and ran a gloved finger over a table.

"Filthy," she snapped, "hasn't been dusted in weeks. I want maids in here now."

She looked into the second room. "And my nigras?" she asked the manager.

"Tolerable accommodations in back, ma'am," he said, wishing she'd go away. He had a headache from the heat.

Mrs. Benson pointed to the room that was to be the nursery and turned to Queen. "Get William settled in there," she said.

"Abner's hungry, Missy," Queen began, but Mrs. Benson wasn't interested in Abner's problems. Or Queen's. Or anyone else's.

"Then Abner will have to wait," she said. "William comes first, at all times. You know that."

She went into the bedroom, commanding the manager to follow her by the sheer tone of her voice.

"I will need a baby carriage for my son, and good supply of clean towels"

was the last Queen heard. She took the boys into the nursery room, and laid them on the bed. She changed William's linen, got him ready for bed, and offered to feed him, but he wasn't hungry. She did not dare feed Abner while Mrs. Benson was in her present mood.

She ran to Mrs. Benson's orders for an hour, and then one of the bellhops showed her to her tolerable accommodations, which were intolerable, and had been the old slave quarters, tin shacks at the back of the hotel. The waning afternoon had not relieved the heat, and Queen's room was an oven.

Like everyone else, Queen was on the edge of her temper, for the weather was unbearable, and Abner was still crying.

She opened a tiny lid in the roof that was the only ventilation, grumbling about Mrs. Benson's commands, and then sat on the bed to feed Abner.

"Bossy ol' bitch," she said to herself about her employer, as her son took his fill. She looked about the awful room.

"Hotter'n Hades," she said. "How's a body s'pposed to sleep?" She rested her head back against the wall, and sang a little lullaby to Abner until he was done, and then she changed him, and settled him on a pillow on the floor. She thought she might feel better if she had a wash, and opened the door to find the black washhouse, when Micah came to her.

"She want you, Missy Queen," he said. He looked tired and frayed, for his Missy had been difficult. "She gwine shoppin'. "

Queen began to understand why the other wet nurse had left Mrs. Benson's employ. She wondered what to do about Abner, but would not leave him on his own, so, toting him on her hip, she went to find Mrs. Benson, who was in the lobby complaining about the quality of the soap.

The world, or the hotel, had jumped to Mrs. Benson's command. A baby carriage had been found for William, and Abner was allowed the use of it.

Once the boys were comfortable and the matter of the soap resolved, Mrs.

Benson went out onto the street, with Queen following, pushing the carriage

Benson went out onto the street, with Queen following, pushing the carriage.

Micah went with them, although Queen wasn't sure why, but he helped her with the baby carriage.

There were very few people about, just some strikers walking as if with some purpose to somewhere else, and three or four white bystanders, jeering them. Queen saw a couple of sheriffs, with their guns, moving quickly to someplace in the town, and there were shouts and cheers coming from that direction.

Queen would have walked the other way, but to her surprise Mrs. Benson walked toward the distant noise, looking for a shop that suited her list.

As they crossed the street, a black beggar approached her.

"Spare some change, Missy," he pleaded with Mrs. Benson. "I ain't et in a week."

"Then get back to work," Mrs. Benson told him briskly, without breaking her stride. "Lazy nigras," she said to no one in particular, and Queen flushed. Abner and William were asleep, side by side, in the carriage.

Mrs. Benson stopped to look in the window of a provisions store.

"I want good milk," she told Queen. "I don't trust that hotel. And fresh fruit-there must be some fresh fruit somewhere."

Queen looked in the window. There was a display of fine peaches.

"Here," she suggested, but Mrs. Benson glanced at the name on the sign above the store.

"No," Mrs. Benson said. "Not here. They are Semitic."

She walked on. Queen glanced back at the sign, but the name painted on it

meant nothing to her.

“What’s Semitic?” she asked Mrs. Benson.

“Jews,” Mrs. Benson said. “Semites. We do not give them our business. I’m sure there’s somewhere else.”

They walked on, and came closer to the shouting and cheering. Queen could see a large group of men gathered, having a street meeting. Mrs. Benson found a store that suited her, and made her purchases. There was no respite from the heat, and inside the store was hotter than outside.

Shopping done, Mrs. Benson came out with Queen to check her list. Abner had wakened, and Queen picked him up and rocked him while she waited for Mrs. Benson. As she did so, she watched the men at the meeting, and wondered what it was all about. A black man had climbed onto a box, and was making a speech to the strikers.

Sheriffs stood watching, guns ready. White workingmen jeered the speaker.

“You all know our cause,” the speaker told the strikers. “Decent pay fo’ a decent’s day’s work.”

The strikers cheered.

“Cash money, instead of checks that can only be redeemed at plantation stores,” the speaker shouted, and the strikers cheered again.

Mrs. Benson glanced at the speaker, and then went back to ticking things off on her list.

“They’re the ones that should be shot,” she said absently, to Queen. “The ringleaders.”

But Queen was not listening. She was fascinated by the voice of the speaker.

“They promised us better things in better times, but those better days never come,” the speaker proclaimed. “And I am overflowing with their unkept promises.”

It was Davis; Queen was sure of it. She could not see his face clearly, but his voice was as familiar to her as her own. She had found him at last, and her heart, was beating fast, while her shoulders sagged in relief. She listened to the words pour out of him, in impassioned oratory.

“I don’t care what they say they will do,” Davis told his rapt audience. “I judge them only by what they have done. And until now they have done nothing. So from now, we take. But we take only what is rightfully ours, what is rightfully due to us, only what we have been promised.”

He was a beautiful and eloquent speaker. All the deep anger and passion that had churned within him for so many years had finally found its outlet.

Queen’s eyes sparkled with pride and pricked with tears. She moved a little closer, off the sidewalk, onto the road to see him better. She wanted to run to him, to throw herself into his arms, to tell him how much she loved him. But she could not do that here, in public. Her business with him was private.

And there was something else, something more important, to do. She held Abner up, high in the air, as high as she could, so that he might see the man and hear his voice.

Mrs. Benson looked up from her list, and was puzzled to see Queen standing in the road holding her son in the air.

“Come along, Queen, don’t dawdle,” she called, but Queen did not hear her, or if she did, she did not respond. Mrs. Benson clucked in irritation, and moved closer to Queen, to fetch her.

Queen had eyes only for Davis and mind for Abner.

“It is now!” Davis cried, and the strikers cheered him louder than ever.

Oblivious to everything but her boy and his father, Queen cried out to Abner. “Look, boy, it’s yo’ pappy!”

Abner was not the only one who heard this news. Mrs. Benson heard it too, and smiled a small astonished smile of curious excitement. And the look in her eyes was triumphant.

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Oueen wanted to stay, to try to make some contact with Davis, but the cheering strikers led him away, and Mrs. Benson was anxious to be gone.

As they walked back to the hotel, Mrs. Benson chatted happily with Queen, and did not discuss what they had seen, or anything about the strike. As they were about to go into the hotel, she casually asked if Queen knew the man who had been speaking. Queen wasn’t quite sure what to say. She recognized that her actions with Abner must have been puzzling to Mrs.

Benson, and admitted that she thought she had met the man once, a long time ago, but was mistaken. Mrs. Benson seemed satisfied, and they went into the hotel.

Queen’s nerves were jangling, with anticipation because she was so close to Davis, and dread that he might not want to see her again. She tried to work out her feelings toward him, but she was too excited to be rational. She loved him stillshe was sure of that-loved him even more perhaps, for his speech had inspired her, and she was so proud of him it made her heart sing. She could not imagine what he would think of her, or of Abner, and she fretted that he might resent the boy.

She felt a spasm of anger then. Even if Davis did not want to accept parentage, Abner was the reason he had left Huntsville and traveled on the road to his true vocation, so he should be grateful for that, at least. Then she remembered the courtesy and kindness that Davis had always shown her, except once, and she was sure he must love his son. How could he not?

Queen bathed William, and sat in the nursery room feeding him, while Abner sprawled on the bed, irritable because of the heat. Queen was determined to find Davis, but could think of no way to achieve her goal. There was the possibility that she might run into him in the street, but she didn't want to leave anything to chance. When William was satisfied, she put him to bed in his cot, and then took Abner downstairs, to eat her own meal in the kitchen, with the hotel staff. The bellhops and kitchen staff were talking about the strike, in complete sympathy with it, and full of praise for this man Davis, who had come to town when the men first walked off the job, and had inspired them to their present defiant stand. Filled with pride, Queen wanted to ask them how she might find this man, but dared not. This was too public a place, and she was already aware that some element of danger attended Davis. After she had eaten, she found Mrs. Benson, and asked if she might be allowed to have a few hours rest, she was not feeling well.

Slightly to her surprise, Mrs. Benson was fussily concerned for her welfare, and agreed - to her request. Queen went to her room and waited until she was sure Mrs. Benson would be having her dinner with her husband, for they always ate at the same time. She put Abner on her hip and slipped out into the night to find Davis.

She wandered the empty streets hoping that by chance he would appear, but he did not. She went back to the scene of the afternoon's meeting, looked around for some clue to his whereabouts, and saw a small, lighted tavern across the road. Some men were drinking outside, squatting against the wall, and she recognized a couple of them as strikers she had seen that afternoon. She went to them, but although they gave her appreciative whistles, they were wary of her, and ignored her. Adjusting Abner's shawl so that his color could be clearly seen, she summoned her courage and spoke to one of the men, and told him she wanted to find Davis. They shrugged and

tried to send her on her way, but she said she would make a scene if they didn't help. She put on a fine performance, claiming that Davis had promised her marriage but had dumped her, leaving her with his baby, and she wanted to give him a piece of her mind.

Which was true, In her frustration with him-at his departure, at the difficulty of locating him, and now the difficulty of getting to him-Queen felt a genuine anger rising inside her. It convinced the men, but still they resisted her, until Queen's voice rose, and she threatened to call the sheriffs if they didn't help. The men begged her to silence and had a whispered conversation among themselves. One went into the tavern, and came out a few minutes later with another, older man, who questioned Queen, and looked carefully at Abner. Her story or her indignation, or both, convinced him, and he jerked his head to indicate that Queen should follow him. He and the striker who had called him led her to the back of the tavern, where the horses were tethered. They mounted, and the older man pulled Queen up behind him, while the younger rode with Abner in his arms.

They rode for a couple of miles into the night, the moon lighting their way, until the farmland gave way to woods. About a mile into the trees, by a small body of water, a river or an inlet, there was a shack, guarded by two or three armed strikers. Queen could see at least two other black men, with guns, watching them from the trees. The guards at the shack accosted them as they brought their horses to a halt.

"She say she know him," the older man told them. The guards looked at Queen doubtfully.

" White bitch?" one murmured. Queen was still on her horse, and reached out her hand to Abner.

"This here my boy," she said.

The younger striker offered Abner for the guard's inspection, and they looked from him to Queen. One of them told her to get down and wait, and he went into the shack. Queen dismounted and took Abner. She stood waiting in the hot,

humid night, a little frightened by the guns, and thrilling in anticipation.

After a few moments, the door of the shack opened, and Davis came out.

He stared at Queen, and emotions rose within

her that were too complex for her to begin to understand, for his face was filled with amazement, and then with pain.

Then he smiled, a sweet smile.

"Is it you?" he said.

Queen nodded, not trusting herself to speak. And then a furious, blazing anger began in her belly, surged through her body, and burst out of her.

"Yes!" she cried. "And this is your boy!"

She marched up to Davis and thrust Abner at him.

"Didn't you even want to see what he looked like?"

If Davis was surprised by her fury, he didn't show it. He stared at Queen, then looked at Abner, and, gentle as a shepherd with a lamb, he took his son from her, and held him close. Tears stung in his eyes.

"I knew he would be beautiful," he whispered softly to Queen. "Like you."

Queen saw his tears and almost started to cry herself, for his reaction to his son was more than she had ever hoped might be possible. But still she was angry with him, and loved him, all at once.

"I had enough of yo' sweet talk to last me a lifetime," she said, and turned away from him. It was then that she saw that the strikers and the guards were smiling at her, laughing even, and her anger churned. She rounded on Davis.

"You got any idea what it's like for a woman, stuck on her own with a baby,

no man to turn to?" Like a festering boil, all the disappointments and deprivations of her life, the loneliness and injustice, the hurt and the misery, come to a hot and angry head, and were lanced by his tears. She was yelling at him now, and at the guards and strikers, and at all men.

"I trusted you," she cried. "But, oh, you men, you gets what you want, and then the hell with us women. You could have told me. You could have written, but not even a word, or a letter-"

"I cain't write, you know that!" Davis said, trying to control his temper.

He had not expected her wrath, and he was hurt by it, and guilty.

"Could've sent a paper with yo' mark on it," Queen retorted. "That would have been something-"

Suddenly he couldn't control his temper. His men were

laughing almost openly, and his anger raged within him, and matched her own. He gave Abner to a guard, marched to her, grabbed her and kissed her violently, harshly, beautifully, on the mouth, but she pulled away from him.

"That's my mark!" he cried. "You had that! You got that! "

He would not let her go, and kissed her again. And this time she responded to him, and kissed with all the passion that a life of frustration and a year of missing him, of loving him, and wanting him, and not having him, had engendered within her.

The shack was small and sparsely furnished, one room with a sleeping area separated from the rest by a curtain. He brought her inside and dismissed the strikers. They sat together for a while hardly talking, content to be with each other. He rocked Abner to sleep on his lap, and the boy was secure in his father's arms.

“He’s a fine boy,” Davis said.

“He’s yo’ son,” Queen nodded.

He had not asked what had happened to her while they had been apart, but now he did.

“Has it been hard for you?”

Queen thought for a while before responding. It had been hard, but she had bome it, and now she had her reward.

… Tain’t been easy,” she said softly.

“I’s sorry,” he said. He looked at the sleeping Abner, and Queen understood that it was time for something else to happen. She found a blanket and made a rough bed for her baby, then faced her man. She went to him, leaned up to him, and kissed him. He responded, but then stopped her.

“No,” he said. “Do nothing. I owe you love.”

He picked her up, carried her to the bed, and laid her down. With infinite care, singing her soft crooning lullabies, he touched her, stroked her, kissed her, and each time she tried to respond, he told her no. Slowly, taking forever, he freed her from her clothes, and himself from his own. When she lay naked before him, he traced his tongue over her entire body until he tasted every inch of her, and with his fingers caressed her hair, her eyes, her mouth, her chin, her breasts, until she

thought she must faint from the beauty of it. He lay beside her, and the warmth and hardness of him pressing against her was wonderful. She opened her body to him, and her heart and her soul, and when they were joined as one flesh she felt complete again, and whole, and all the trammeling care of her life disappeared into a blaze of happiness that engulfed her.

Afterward, they dozed together for a while, and when she awoke he was still

there, it had not been a dream. But a sadness had settled on him.

“I cain’t ask you to stay,” he whispered. “It ain’t safe.”

“I don’t care,” she cried softly.

“I care,” he told her. “I will not have harm come to you. Or him.”

She shivered in fear for him, and he held her close.

“Should I be scared for you?” she whispered, and he could not hide the truth from her. Too much was at stake.

“Why not?” he said. “I scared for me.”

He wanted to rid her of her immediate fear, and explain the high, bright future that he saw.

“This is where it begins,” he said. “This is where the black man draws the line, and says enough, no more. This is where the promise that was made must be fulfilled.”

She believed him, and would have followed him to the end of the earth.

Morning mist lazed over the river. The steel gray of dawn crept into the sky, and filtered though the window of the shack. A new day was beginning, but still they lay together.

“I gotta get back,” Queen said.

“She be mad, yo’ Missy?” he wondered.

Queen expected that Mrs. Benson would be mad as hell, but she didn’t care.

A moment with Davis was worth a year of her anger. He made arrangements for her safe return to Beaufort, and watched her ride away into the morning with his son.

Davis had been shocked by his decision to desert Queen, although he could

never exactly pinpoint the moment when he had made up his mind to do it. It might have been when she first told him of the child, it might have been as they lay making plans for the future, or it might have been as the day

of leaving approached and the call that he heard to do something else got stronger and stronger. He was ashamed at what he was doing to her, but did not believe he had any alternative, for the general good was greater than her particular need. Queen, he guessed, or knew, or persuaded himself, would survive, and while it would be hard for her, she had a friend to turn to in Joyce. He also hoped that the sisters would be kind to her, as it seemed, in general, they had been,

He also believed himself to be worthless, and therefore not worthy of her. Filled up with rage against the world, which rage he contained when he was with Queen for he could find no outlet for it, he believed that on ‘ e day that hate must explode into some form of action or violence, and he did not want her to be hurt by it. On the appointed day, he left the sisters’ house early, as had been planned. He went to his shack, put some things in a bag, and began walking, away from Huntsville, away from Alabama, away from Queen. He cursed himself as he walked, and tried to console himself with the concept that she had his seed inside her, the best part of him, but did not convince himself. He made a vow that he would change his wretched ways, that he would actively seek some effective role in life, rather than passively accepting what life threw at him.

Later, when he found that role, he blessed Queen, for it was she who had provoked him to it, and he thought of her fondly, and his heart ached to see the product of their love.

He went to Atlanta, and got himself a job assisting a blacksmith, as Abram had taught him, and was persuaded by the smithy, who was politically militant, to join the local guild. So it was that he found his voice, for the sense of brotherhood he obtained in the union was miraculous to him. For the first time in his life he felt he was not alone, that his grievances and anger were not unique to him. The shared sense of purpose, the bloody-minded determination to take what was rightfully, morally theirs, by combative action if necessary, thrilled him.

The words that he had kept contained inside him because he saw no point in saying them burst out, and he became, in a short space of time, an admired and respected orator, and a considerable asset to the fledgling union cause.

It was the union that sent him traveling, to the center of industrial unrest, and it was he who voiced the frustrations and

ambitions and dreams of his black brethren. Many of the slaves had been dispossessed from their only homes, which were the plantations, they had few skills to earn a living in this new world of freedom, and, if they had the skills, they were cheated and abused by their new Massas, the bosses.

He took the highminded words of the government to heart, and equality had genuine meaning for him. He wanted no more than that for his brothers, but he was determined to achieve at least that, and to take it forcibly if it was not given. He also understood something that set him apart from his peers, and gave him a purer sense of purpose, a purer power, and a purer ability to achieve his goals. He understood that it was not simply a matter of black versus white, but of worker against boss. While his speeches were directed primarily to blacks, he had the vision to include disgruntled, unemployed whites in his embrace, although most rejected him.

The low-country plantations of Georgia and South Carolina grew rice and fermented trouble. In this swampy land of tidal rivers and intolerable summer weather, of disease and racist attitudes, the working conditions of the field hands were intolerable. It was in Brunswick, south of Beaufort, that the hands had revolted, as Queen had heard, and refused to obey their martinet masters, many of whom were veteran Confederate officers to whom the concept of free niggers was intolerable. Race riots had ensued, and units of the national guard were called out. The end of slavery, the end of an abundant supply of free labor, had revealed that many of the plantations were not economically viable, and so the hands were employed in vile conditions that bordered on paid slavery. Instead of being given their meager wages in cash, the hands were given checks that could be redeemed only at plantation stores, and so they were feudally bonded to their employers. Without specie, cash money, they could not survive, as there were

few other jobs for unskilled men, and for most of them, the land was the only labor they knew. Davis had come to Beaufort to try to improve their conditions, but the plantation owners were completely resistant to change, claiming they could not afford it, and even more resistant to unions and a leader from somewhere else who incited their niggers to rebel, or inspired disturbing ambitions.

Davis was no revolutionary. He did not want to overthrow the system; he wanted the working black man's place within the system to be recognized.

It was a fine distinction, which many whites who heard him speak refused to recognize, and to many he represented a potential for intolerable violence. The horrors of the French Revolution, the destruction of an entire class system and its egalitarian aftermath, were the foundation of the fears of the white ruling class, and the winds of industrial and social change that were sweeping through Europe fanned those fears into fires of burning resentment against anyone who spoke of equality, of race or class.

Yet there was hope. A black man in Beaufort, encouraged by Davis, was determined to stand for mayor, and given the preponderance of newly enfranchised black voters, he might very well win. This prospect was deeply shocking to the whites, and, desperate as they were to find some focus for their rage, some scapegoat, Davis was increasingly and unrealistically seen as the single engine of black ambition. Davis laughed at the attention, for no one man was responsible for these surging changes; they were the consensus of the many. But he knew he could direct the general mood to particular ends.

He also knew it was dangerous, and that the bosses, and many of the white working class, could not let the situation in Beaufort continue. A showdown was approaching, and Davis was ready for it, and did not fear its possible consequences.

Until Queen came to him.

When he saw Queen standing in the moonlight outside his shack, his child in her arms, his heart sank. She was part of his past, the other him, and was safe there from danger. There was no place for her in his new life, because that might bring harm to her, or the boy, and he could not bear the thought of anything happening to her. She had suffered enough, and partly because of him. His sense of responsibility to her was so profound that he wanted her gone, even though her going would pain him as no fire ever could.

But she was there, and he could not resist his heart. He had taken her to him, and loved her as well as he could because he owed her so much.

But now he had to find some way to

get her away from here, out of his life, and away from the possibility of harm, which loomed so large on his horizon.

The striker who took Queen back to Beaufort delivered her to the back of the hotel. Queen went to her room, and wondered how she could face Mrs.

Benson. She knew her Missy must be furiously angry, for she had missed at least one feeding time for William, and although she had claimed sickness, Mrs. Benson must surely have checked her room, and found her gone. Yet the maternal side of her also worried for William, who seemed so helpless when he lay in her arms, so dependent on her milk, on the sustenance she gave him. She felt guilty about what she had done, but was inspired by Davis, and so she went to Mrs. Benson's room, ready for anything.

She heard William before she saw him, because the boy was yelling as if he had never been fed. Queen's spirit sank, but she tapped on the door and went into the room.

"There you are at last!" Mrs. Benson cried.

Mrs. Benson was certainly angry, but it was not quite the wrath that Queen expected. Although the words were harsh, and the tone, there was also a tinge of relief in her voice. William was on her knee, and she was trying to feed him bread soaked in warm milk, but he didn't want that.

Queen started an apology, but Mrs. Benson had to have her say.

"The boy's been awake all night long," she complained. "I haven't had a wink of sleep, nor poor Mr. Benson, with so much on his mind."

The room was a mess, for it was true: Mrs. Benson had been up half the night, trying to calm William, and change his linen, and at the same time assure her husband that all was well. It was another hot day, and she was cross with Queen for causing this interruption to her domestic arrangements, but not for anything else.

"I's sorry," Queen apologized again. She had expected to be sacked, but now she didn't think that was going to happen, or not until William had been fed. She went to the boy, who quieted immediately and sought her breast through her blouse. Queen smiled at him, and told him to be patient. She sat on a chair and fed him, while Mrs. Benson made vain attempts to clean up the room, which smelled of baby.

"Aren't you going to tell me where you've been?" she

demanded of Queen, and rang the bell to summon servants.

Queen was puzzled. Although tetchy, Mrs. Benson was almost friendly to her, as if she'd been a naughty girl who had done some silly trivial wrong, and, the crisis over, was expected to share her naughty secrets.

She tried to think of some lie that would satisfy Mrs. Benson, but none came to her.

"'Men let me guess," Mrs Benson said, and sat at the table. "You've been with Abner's father, perhaps?"

Queen did not look at her, but concentrated on the feeding William. She felt a rush of fear, because she did not know how Mrs. Benson knew of Davis or what her reaction would be. She blushed, and kept her head down.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Queen,” Mrs. Benson laughed. “I saw you in the street yesterday, the way you looked at that wretched union man and told Abner he was his father. I know you lied to me when you told me you didn’t know him.”

Queen’s fear gave way to relief, for now she understood how Mrs. Benson knew, and it didn’t seem devious.

“Yes, m’m” was all Queen said.

There was a knock at the door, and a maid appeared. Mrs. Benson ordered a tray of breakfast for two, and busied herself at the washstand. She chattered about nothing and everything while she waited for breakfast, and Queen began to think that the woman was trying to make some girlish, foolish contact with her. She felt kindly toward Mrs. Benson, and relieved that someone else knew her secret.

The staff arrived, and Mrs. Benson had breakfast set out on the table, while Queen changed William and put him down. When she came back from the nursery, Mrs. Benson was sitting at the table and another place was laid.

For Mr. Benson, Queen assumed, but again, Mrs. Benson surprised her.

“Sit down here with me,” she said, “and have some breakfast, I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Queen was very hungry; she’d had nothing to eat since her dinner the previous night. She pulled out the chair, sat on the edge of it, and took a piece of toast.

“That’s not enough,” Mrs. Benson said. “We have to look after you, for William’s sake.”

She piled a plate with eggs and toast, passed it to Queen, and began to eat herself.

"Now," she said when Queen had relaxed sufficiently to feel comfortable.

"Tell me about Abner's father."

Still, Queen was cautious, and Mrs. Benson giggled.

"He's so very handsome," she said, like a schoolgirl with a crush. Queen smiled too, and told her a little of Davis. Not much, just trivial, womanly things, and Mrs. Benson's eyes were bright with gossip and she shared a few secrets of her own married life. When they were done, Mrs.

Benson took her shopping, but said they should be off the streets that aftemoon for she had heard that there was to be a big strike parade and there could be trouble. It was best for the women to keep out of the way.

Queen was entranced by her consideration, and felt herself warming to Mrs. Benson as the day went on. From the hotel windows, they watched the parade of strikers through the street in the early afternoon, with Davis being carried on the shoulders of some of the men. Queen was filled with pride, and pointed him out to Abner. White workers lined the streets, jeering the procession, and there were some fights.

Mrs. Benson made a lot of complimentary comments about Davis, and tutted about the violence, and Queen forgot that she had said that the ringleaders ought to be shot. Queen saw Mr. Benson standing in the street with some other businessmen, watching the parade, and she asked why he was not with his wife. Mrs. Benson said something vague about business, and suggested that Queen must be tired and should have a nap.

Queen was very tired; she hadn't really slept since yesterday. She took Abner to her room, lay down with him on the bed, and fell fast asleep with her son in her arms, dreaming of the boy's father.

She awoke, some hours later, at sundown, to an urgent tapping on the door, and she heard a fierce whisper.

“Queen!” It was Mrs. Benson. “Wake up-!”

She roused herself, blinked the sleep from her eyes, and opened the door.

Mrs. Benson slipped into the room and shut the door. She was agitated, apparently frightened.

“You must go to him, Abner’s father,” she whispered, her eyes wide with fear. Queen, still fuddled by sleep, did not quite understand.

“Get him away,” Mrs. Benson said urgently. “They know where he is, and he is in danger.”

Queen was awake now, and caught Mrs. Benson’s sense of fear but didn’t know what to do. She looked at Abner.

“I’ll keep Abner safe with me till you return,” Mrs. Benson assured her.

Still it didn’t make sense to Queen; she went to Abner, picked him up, gave him to Mrs. Benson, and looked about the room, pulled at her dress.

“Quickly, take a horse from the stable,” Mrs. Benson said, with more urgency than ever. She clutched Queen to her.

“There will be terrible work done this night,” she whispered.

“It is the Klan.”

For a split second that might have been an eternity, Queen was petrified.

She knew of the Klan. She had seen the dark seeds of it outside Decatur when the masked men had burned the barn, careless if any died in the conflagration, as one woman did. She first heard the formal name on her journeys, this avenging servant of Lucifer, and she was told the rivers of the South held countless bodies of those secretly done to death, and the earth held the unknown graves of those

who had been burned from life.

She panicked for Davis. Reassured by Mrs. Benson as to Abner's welfare, she ran to the stables, saddled and mounted a workhorse, and rode into the twilight, the gloaming.

She did not know that she was followed by a masked white man, who had bound his horse's hooves with cloths to deaden their sound.

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They gathered in the forest at night, for darkness was their friend, and what they did could not withstand the glare of the sun, for it was obscene to God. They claimed divine inspiration for their work and that they stood on the right hand of the celestial throne, but, like the archangel Lucifer, they had fallen from grace, never to rise again. Their symbol was a cross, but it burned with the flames of hell, from whence it had come. Their robes were black, as befitted their satanic origins, but they wore white hoods, to keep their faces hidden from the angels. Their trumpets were clarion calls to violent death.

In the bright light of day they might have seemed like ordinary men, far too mild for the work they did, and they needed anonymity to make them brave. Often they knew their victims well, and had grown up with them, and, cowards, could not kill their helpless friends without the mask of night.

They took strength from their numbers, which were spread wide throughout the land, a huge and hideous secret society whose leaders traveled far from their own homes to spread their demon seed.

So a man had come to them from far away, and stood before them now, in front of the cross of fire. They chanted prayers and sang loud hymns, and did not know that the cacophony made heaven weep.

"This is our land," the speaker roared at them. "White man's land, given to us by God's covenant. But the vile nigger would steal it from us, and we must fight and kill, for if we do not stop them now, where will it end?"

They loved their country and had fought for it honorably in the war, but in defeat they would not surrender their cause. Killing became their creed.

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I am not ashamed to be a white American. I am not afraid to die in defense of my country and my way of life. I am not afraid to kill to defend my country and my way of life. It is my sacred duty."

They claimed they did not hate the nigger just because he was black.

"Miscegenation is our destruction. The African black was a harmless, docile animal, happy in the place that the Bible had allotted him. But liberal Yankees and the lecherous Jew have inbred with the creature, and created a new and impure race who think themselves our equal. They would take the very food from our mouths, and the land from our people."

Most of all, they feared one thing.

"And rape our women!"

And had one solution.

"They must be chopped out root and branch, if the tree of white hope is to survive."

The leader stopped, and a lone voice cried the response to the catechism.

"Let them bum! Let them bum!"

All the voices took up the cry, until the night resounded with the chanting.

"Bum! Bum! Bum!"

“Let the nigger bum in hell!”

83

ToMrs. Benson it was all so simple she could not understand why there was any dispute. It was a covenant with God, and anyone who disputed it was blasphemous and heretic. Initially, her fury had not been directed at the nigras, for they were ignorant animals, led piteously astray by atheists. The Repub lican party was to blame, and its monstrous leader Lincoln, who, with Satan’s help, had devastated the South, freed the slaves, and brought anarchy to what had been Eden. When

Lincoln was struck down by an avenging angel who acted under divine direction, Mrs. Benson fell to her knees in awe of what her Maker had wrought. But the damage to the South had been done, and must be corrected.

They bore Lincoln’s lieutenant, Johnson, with ill grace, but when the butcher Grant ran for the presidency, Mrs. Benson and her husband had vowed to do everything in their power to defeat him and his party.

They were not circumspect in voicing their opinions, nor alone in their feelings. Politically active, they had been introduced to some charming people who were members of a social club, originally founded in Tennessee, that was dedicated to the glory and supremacy of white America. That the activities of the club included occasional nighttime violence toward blacks was not distasteful to the Bensons. After the indignities that defeat in war had heaped on them, the men had to have some outlet for their energy and loss of honor, and the women cheered them on. The coming election gave specific focus to their ideals and their wrath. Wearing black robes and white masks to disguise their faces, they broke up Republican meetings and parades, and on election day itself had successfully prevented many from voting. Grant won in spite of this, by margins that appalled them, and the Bensons believed that while they had done well, they

had not done enough. It also became clear to them that the most potent way to achieve their aims was to rid the land of the pestilential black.

When she was little, her parents, devout Protestants, in structed her diligently. They taught her that the Bible was the unedited manuscript of ‘ God, and the foundation of all their lives. That Jews were the sons of Cain and had murdered Christ. That niggers were the sons of Ham who had mocked his father, the patriarch Noah, and God, in revenge, had taken his soul. That Catholics were idolaters who worshiped graven images, who bought their way out of damnation, and who gave to a man, the Pope, the omnipotence of the Almighty.

As a girl growing up in southern Georgia, she never met a Jew, and she had never actually despised the nigras for they were not worthy of it.

They were simply nigras and slaves and she had enjoyed the company of many, as she would enjoy the company of a pet dog or cat. As she grew older, she came

to fear black men, convinced she was an object of their sexual desire, and she lived in mortal fear of being raped. She might survive the rape, but could not bear the taint of it nor any issue from it, and would kill herself and the fetus before she gave birth to a mulatto.

Shortly before the war, and partly because of the Northern belligerence, she married a very eligible young merchant from Atlanta whom she had met at her coming-out ball, and who shared her ambitions and attitudes. Both were formidable overachievers and planned an exemplary life. They believed devoutly in God and as devoutly in the Confederation, and detested abolitionists, emancipationists, and all could not understand the simple truth. White Christians were bom to rule and all others to serve. America would be a wasteland inhabited by naked savages if it were -not for white vision, white industry, white intelligence. The blacks had been rescued from the jungle and brought to this country to share the white man’s bounty, and should be grateful for it. But, like the senseless animals they were, nothing was ever enough for nigras; the more

you gave them the more they expected, and the only discipline they understood was the lash.

When the war came, Mrs. Benson's husband enlisted immediately and was killed in the battle of Antietam.

It broke Mrs. Benson's hearL She ne - ver forgave Lincoln, she never forgave the Yankees, and she never forgave the ni gras, who were the cause of it all.

She went back to live with her parents in the country and wore widow's weeds for the rest of the war. Convinced she would never marry again, she devoted her life to charitable causes, but longed for a man in her life.

At a social event she met a prosperous businessman from Atlanta whose health had prevented him from enlisting in the military. He had done what he could as a civilian, supplying munitions to the Confederate government, and his patriotism had been rewarded with excellent profits.

Thanks to his poor health and judicious investments in California, he had survived the war in good shape, physically and financially. His intolerance of Yankees and nigras was greater than her own, and he fueled her new hatred, and mended her broken heart. He informed her of the insatiable sexual habits of the decadent, animal nigger, and

conjured up a potential nightmare world of miscegenation, in which the blood of good, industrious whites would be sullied and abased, and the progeny dragged down to the level of the jungle. He also told her of the Jewish conspiracy to rule the world and destroy all Christians just as they had killed Jesus.

They married two years after the war, and devoted their lives to the single-minded belief that the South would rise again. His zeal and sense of duty made Mr. Benson a wellrespected member of their club, and they traveled the state together, forming new chapters, encouraging new members, and doing the violent errands that they believed would restore them to God's favor. In all things they were a partnership, and Mrs.

Benson attended meetings with her husband, wore their uniform with pride, was never far from her husband's side.

Except tonight. She could not be with him tonight. She had done her night's work, and she sat in the hotel sitting room, rocking William on her lap, and waiting for his nurse.

Queen rode fast to Davis, unaware that she was revealing his location to a masked white man who was silently following her. Guards took her to him when she got to the shack, but she could not persuade them to leave.

"But they know where you are," she cried, for she believed what Mrs.

Benson had told her.

Davis was silent, and Queen believed he was considering a decision, but he was not. He was accepting his fate.

"Then let them come," he said. "We cannot run forever. I will not."

He had never tried to avoid the consequences of his stubborn convictions; indeed, he almost seemed to embrace them. When he ran away from the plantation it was so that he would be caught, returned, and punished, even unto death, in a vain attempt to shame his Massas.

"It's the Klan!" Queen cried again. "They'll kill you!"

But he had guards and guns, he told her, and would be safe. She begged him to go, pleaded to be allowed to stay with him.

"No," he said. "Go to the boy. He is the future."

He hugged her and kissed her, and forced her away from him, and then he gathered his few men and made preparations for their coming visitors.

Queen would not allow herself to believe that she had said a final goodbye to him, could not believe he would die. She dreaded what this night would bring, but took the duty he had given her as a solemn charge. Whatever else happened, Abner had to be protected. At the hotel, she ran quickly up the stairs and went to the Bensons' suite. She knocked, but the door was open and she went in. The sitting room was empty, so she went to the nursery, calling for Abner.

William was asleep in his cot, but Abner was not there. Her heart began to worry for him, although her mind told her he was safe, with Mrs. Benson.

She went back into the sitting room, and saw that Mrs. Benson had come from the main bedroom and was locking the door to the suite.

"Where's Abner?" she cried.

Mrs. Benson put the key in her pocket and turned from the door. She smiled at Queen, for she was content, and happy.

"Abner isn't here," she said. "He is doing God's work tonight. "

There was something in her manner that caused in Queen the primal urges that only a mother can know, when she is sure her offspring is in mortal danger.

"Where is he? Where's my baby?" she asked apprehensively.

"He is with his father," Mrs. Benson said. "Whether he lives or dies depends on what his father does."

Queen did not, could not, understand the complexity of the relationships in which she was entangled; she knew only blind fury and cold hate. She screamed and ran to Mrs. Benson, to fight with her to get the key, to get out, to do anything, but Mrs. Benson was ready for her and struck her hard across the face, and then again, and Queen fell to the floor, moaning.

The guards waiting in simple ambush in the trees near the shack thought they were ready, but they had the disadvantage of fear. Although there was no official membership of the Klan in Beaufort, they all knew what it meant, and knew the

membership of the Klan in Beaufort, they all knew what it meant, and knew the cause had many sympathizers. It was as'well they did not know that Mr. Benson had enlisted some of those sympathizers since he had been in Beaufort, and given them purpose, direction, and

collective strength through unity, for if they had known, their fear would have been magnified. Or perhaps it didn't matter what they knew, for the robed men came bursting out of the trees, on horseback, carrying brands, and several had military training. It was a short, sharp battle that the guards lost because they did not believe they could win. Two died instantly, one was fatally wounded, and two ran away into the night.

Davis fired from the hut, but he was not a trained shot, and the men on horseback kept beyond his range as they rode in circles around his fortress, calling on him to come out. Davis roared at them to rot in hell, but one night rider who seemed to be the leader shouted out to him.

"Come on out, nigger," he shouted. "We have your boy."

Davis looked at his gun, which was useless to him now. He peered out of the window and saw that the leader had spoken the truth. A brand illuminated one of the riders who was holding Abner.

Davis was scared, but not to die, he almost welcomed that. He had courted death too often to be afraid of it, and it had become his ultimate friend. He was scared for his son, whom he hardly knew.

"Come on out, or the boy bums first," the leader shouted again.

Davis thought that if his life had any purpose or meaning, it was now.

If he could do anything to save his son, it was worth any sacrifice, for he believed what he had told Queen. The boy was the future. Davis had lived in negativity all his life, and his life was meaningless to him.

Then a simple woman had loved him without limitation, and had bome his child, and he had found a purpose at last. Not to be father to the boy, but to try to

create a better world for that boy to live in.

And he had succeeded. The work he had done had helped build the foundations of something that he knew he would not see complete in his lifetime, no matter how long he lived. But he had seen a wrong and tried to right it, and, like the everwidening, rippling circles from a pebble thrown into a pond, the righting of that wrong would continue, for endless generations, for the righting of wrongs was an endless task. He had achieved what he had set out to do, for the world that his son

would inherit would be better, if only by an infinitesimal degree, than the world that Davis had been born into, and that, no matter how small, was much. He knew the boy's mother would communicate to him what his father had done, and the boy would be proud, and hold his head high, and know that his father had helped to change the world.

Suddenly, the immensity of human existence and experience astonished him.

His ancestors had been brought unwillingly from Africa, and kept, like the Israelites in Egypt, in bondage. But, like the children of Israel, they had survived their ordeal and been freed from their chains. Faith and hope had sustained them, and they had taken their first few footsteps in a vast and uncharted territory that beggared the imagination, for it was without border or boundary. As long as the human race existed, the greed of some would battle the charity of others. In his life, he had seen a great wrong righted, because some good men, white men, he realized with a wry smile, had sought to redress what other white men had instituted. He had taken advantage of the freedom that they brought to him, and carried on the fight, because he had hope for the future. Queen had given him that, and faith that he could make some change, no matter how tiny. In God's eye he must be smaller than any ant, but he had contributed to the hill.

Queen had been right all the time. Hate was meaningless, negative. Love was the sublime driving force, for what was love but faith and trust in another person, and hope for the future. And the greatest gifts a father could give his son were faith and hope and love.

The boy must live.

They threw a rope over a branch on a tree, and put the noose at the end of the rope around Davis's neck. They kicked the horse he sat on, and he felt a sharp and sudden pain and a choking in his throat, and he jerked and jolted at the end of the rope, by instinctive reaction, because his body fought to breathe. His eyes grew dim, but his mind and his heart did not fight against the coming of the dark angel, but welcomed it, because suddenly he saw a great, golden light and as it flooded over him it revealed, for a moment, the most beautiful land he had ever seen, a land of untold promise as viewed from the highest mountain, and he knew he had found home at last.

They doused his body with paraffin and set brands to it, and as the flames engulfed him, the man who was the leader held Abner up to see the burning body.

"Watch him bum, boy, and remember! " the leader said. "Watch your pappy bum."

Queen had crawled into a comer, into a fetal ball. She was clutching herself, moaning to herself, but her mind was numb, and she did not hear the explanation that Mrs. Benson gave her.

"it is for William, you see, and all the little white children of America.

It is our sacred, bounden duty to ensure that they inherit a world of peace and order. A clean and pure America, unsullied by animal blood. It is God's law."

She was hugging William to her, caressing him with maternal love, oblivious of the maternal pain she had caused to another human being, for she did not believe that being was human. The creature had been useful, her milk nourished William, and thankfully milk was not blood. She could still be useful in the glory

days to come when the true kingdom of God was established in this bounteous land, for she had been sent by Providence to aid their night's work. But she thought a visit to the doctor was in order for Queen, to make sure she bred no more bastards.

There was a tap on the door. Queen cried out and scrabbled into the comer in fear. Mrs. Benson went to the door and unlocked it, and Mr. Benson came in. He nodded at his wife.

"Now God be praised, who has brought us to this hour," she prayed. Oh, but she longed to be part of it, to be present at the killing, for she knew the effect it had on her husband, and, vicariously, on her. Mr. Benson grabbed her and kissed her lustily. Then he saw Queen.

"Get her out," he said huskily.

"My baby, where's my baby," Queen moaned. Mr. Benson came to her, dragged her to her feet, and pushed her out of the room.

"He's with his father," he said, to be rid of her. He slammed the door, and turned to his wife, his sexual energy charged to fever pitch by murder.

Queen did not take a horse, because she had no mind to think of practicality, and did not want to arrive at where she had to go. She did not dare imagine what she would find when she got to the shack, but she had to go there, because that was where they were. Moaning and crying, clutching at her dress, grabbing at her hair, she staggered through the night, oblivious to all around her, flames of torment filling her mind, holding on by a slim, silken thread to sanity, which thread might break at any moment.

It was dawn when she got there, and mist lazed across the river and the land.

She saw the charred body of Davis swinging gently from the tree when she was still some distance away, but she didn't cry out, for it was what she had been

expecting. Moaning still, she stumbled toward him, and then she saw Abner lying motionless on the ground beneath his father.

She screamed to heaven then, and fell to the ground, at her lowest ebb of self. Grief flowed upon grief, and still more grief, and pain, and fury at the unfairness of life so prematurely taken.

“What have we ever done to them, Lord?” she cried. “Why do they hate us so much?”

She swooned, in abject wretchedness.

And God, as if ashamed of what He had wrought, relented.

A gentle rain started to fall.

It woke Abner up, and he began to cry.

PART FOUR

A WIFE AND

MOTHER, LOVED

Beyond the years the soul shall find That endless peace fbi-which it pined, For light appears, And to the eyes that still were blind With blood and tears Their sight shall come all unconfined Beyond the years.

-PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

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Rain drizzled down on the mighty Tennessee River at Savannah. Alec Haley steered his ferry, a small, flat-bottomed steamboat, from the northern shore to the south. It was late afternoon, a busy time of day, with people anxious to get to their homes. His passengers had their coats pulled up over their heads as shelter from the rain, or old newspaper or blankets to protect their hats. It had been raining for days, and there was very,little conversation among the passengers; the weather had dampened their spirits.

As Alec guided the ferry to the small jetty, new passengers were sheltering under trees, waiting to make the journey north.

Alec tied a line to the wharf and the passengers disembarked, calling thanks or farewell to him, and made their way up the muddy track, which led past the Cherry mansion on the hill and on into town. The new passengers dashed from the shelter of the trees and took their places on the boat. They greeted Alec as cheerfully as the depressing weather would allow and Alec took their fares, exchanged greetings, and looked around for any latecomers. It was then that he saw the woman.

She was tiny and light-skinned, with a darker child on her hip, wrapped in a thin blanket. She was poorly dressed, her coat was wom and sodden by the rain, and she had cardboard tucked into her shoes. She stood under the trees, apparently oblivious to the weather, and stared at nothing, as if she were lost. Alec was puzzled. He assumed she wanted to cross the river-there was no other reason for her to be waiting therebut she made no move toward him.

“Comm’ on?” he called.

It broke the woman’s reverie. She looked at him as if she did not know where she was, and was surprised to see him.

She walked slowly to the jetty, then stopped again, uncertain of something. Some few of the passengers on the boat were already grumbling at the delay she was causing, but Alec guessed the reason.

“It’s a nickel,” he said.

The woman opened her small, tattered purse and counted out a few pennies, obviously down on her luck. Alec watched, intrigued by her light skin and her darker child.

“Where you headin’?” he asked her.

She looked at him with vacant eyes.

“North,” she said. She gave him the money, climbed onto the boat, and settled on a bench. She pulled the blanket closer around the boy, her coat tighter about herself, and waited with patience for the journey to begin. She had nothing else to do.

” C’mon, Alec! ” a passenger shouted. ” I’s gettin’ soaked. “

Alec grunted and cast off the line. “Make y’hair grow,” he said to the complainant, Fred, who was bald. He started the engine, and the ferry chugged north.

The weather didn’t bother Alec. He loved his ferry, and, together with the twenty acres of farmland he owned, it gave him a good living. He was settled and secure, his own man, and owed nothing to anyone, except a sense of gratitude to Massa Cherry, who was not, and never had been, his Massa.

Following the common custom among slaves, Alec had taken the name Haley from his true Massa, although his real father’s name was Baugh. William Baugh was an overseer on the Haley plantation in Marion County, Alabama, who had sometimes taken his pleasure with a slave woman, half black, half Cherokee, called Sabrina. It was a casual relationship, and when a son, Alec, was bom, he became a child of the plantation, owned by the Massa.

An honest and industrious boy, he grew up in the protection of the extended family that slave life provided. His several surrogate fathers taught him well, and by the time he was a young man he could turn his hand to almost any job that the plantation required. He accepted his slavery only because he had no known other life, but he deeply resented his lack of freedom, his inability to choose his own life, and be his own Massa. The fact that he was never whipped did not reduce his hostility; it was injustice enough that he was not free.

But he was cheerful and energetic, and looked for the best in all other aspects of his life. Shortly before the end of the war he fell in love with a tiny slave called Teenie, and married her when freedom came to them. He could have stayed on the plantation because Massa Haley respected his ability, but Alec had a young man’s zest for adventure. He and Teenie set off to discover the world with their new daughter, Minnie.

He took work where he could find it, as a farmhand, or driving cattle to the railroad, but times were hard in Alabama. Looking for opportunity, they headed North. They never got farther than Tennessee. In Savannah, Alec, looking for work, had been engaged by Mr. Cherry, and after proving his skill on the land, was given some acres to sharecrop. It was a hard life but a rewarding one. They were blessed with a son, whom they called Freeland, for this was the land of their freedom, and another daughter, Julie, and Teeme modified her name to Tennie, in honor of the state that was their new home.

Tragedy struck when Tennie died in childbirth. Alec grieved for her sorely, and for a time lost his appetite for life, Mr. Cherry, perhaps as a form of solace for Alec, whom he liked and admired, purchased a boat to institute a ferry service across the river, and offered him the management of it. It was the balm that Alec needed. He loved the river life. He loved the river on sunny days, when the sun sparkled on the water, and the paddle steamers chugged by. He loved the river on cloudy days, when the fisherman came out in force, sitting for hours in the hope of a bite, cogitating the world, and calmed by their own unhurried pace and the reluctant appetite of the fish. He loved the river in the summer momings, when mist obscured the shores, and he loved it on winter days, when the crisp cold gave him something to complain about. He loved the fall, when the changing colors of the leaves delighted his eye, and he loved it in the spring, when he was filled with a sense of the renewal of life. He still farmed his acres, with the help of George, a local lad, an orphan who was like a son to him, but the river was his obsession.

Apart from a few itinerant travelers, he knew most of his passengers by name, and much of the detail of their lives, and he basked in their endless, idle gossip and chatter. He was kind to those in need of assistance, stem with those who offended him, and did his best to provide

his children with a good home life. In many ways his life was full, but an important part of his heart was empty. He missed Tennie sorely, and he was lonely.

He looked at the thin, frail woman sitting on the bench, her child held firmly in her protective embrace, and guessed that North was an ambivalent destination for her, an ideal to cling to because she had nothing else, and wished he could help and give her some other purpose. He had seen an endless procession of freed slaves head North, only to return weeks, months, years later, with nothing in their pockets but broken dreams. And for all those who came back, he knew ten times that number stayed, in disillusion.

He wondered where the woman would sleep that night, or what she would eat.

He had seen that her purse was almost empty, and seized the moment. They were about halfway across the river.

"That girl of your'n still looking for a job?" he called to Fred, the bald passenger, who was an old sparring partner.

Fred stared at Alec in surprise. "She ain't lookin' fo' a job," he said.

His daughter had a job, a good one, nanny to a white family.

"Well, if'n you hear of anyone…" Alec shrugged. "Massa Cherry's been looking to' help this past two month, and no fool girl's got the sense to apply."

Although it was said to Fred, he spoke loudly, above the rain, so that the woman would hear.

"Good job fo' someone," he continued. "Room and board and good eatin'. And you know Dora, who cooks for Massa Cherry, she c'n make mean victuals. Her hog ribs with barbecue sauce-oh, man, that's eatin'."

He knew he had struck home, because he saw a flicker of interest in the woman's eyes, and pushed his point.

"An' her pumpkin pie, and her peach cobbler-"

But the mouths of the other passengers were watering too. It was late in the day; they were on their way home and looking forward to a good dinner.

They shouted him down with aggrieved announcements that they hadn't eaten yet, or were hungry, or that their Missus could make the best peach pie in the

country. The woman didn’t respond to the din.

A WIFE AND MOTHER, LOVED 723

“Jus’ sayin’. ” Alec shrugged again. “You cain’t get a good hog up North.

They all skinny ol’ things up there.”

He docked the ferry at the northern jetty, and the passengers crowded off, bidding him farewell, hungry for their dinners. The woman quit the ferry with them, and stood on the shore for a moment as if wondering which way to go. New passengers began crowding on, jostling each other and complaining of the rain. Alec, who had been busy tying up the line, looked up to take the fares, and could see no sign of the woman. He shrugged and returned to his business.

They sailed south again, and Alec could not get her out of his mind, an itty-bitty thing, who carried such a sense of hopelessness with her. He had done all he could; he had planted a seed and it hadn’t taken. He wished her well, wherever she was, and fell into conversation about the grasshopper plague in the west.

Freeland was waiting for him on the southern side, and dashed from the trees to help his father tie up. Fresh from school, which he hated, Freeland loved to work on the ferry with his father. School was a pain in the you know what. He helped passengers off and new ones on, and was allowed to take the fares, because he was good at counting.

“Y’c’n count good, an’ you never had much schoolin’,” he said to his father, and barked an unnecessary order to the passengers. “All aboard!”

“I still have trouble countin’ past ten,” his father grinned, and cast off.

To Freeland, it was all grossly unfair. He could count past ten, he could count to anything, he did most of the money counting for his pappy, and he wanted to leave school and work on the farm, like George, his hero.

He never missed an opportunity for stressing his case to his father, especially on the ferry, and did so now, as they headed north. But Alec was adamant.

“You stayin’ till you done sixth grade,” Alec told him sharply, as he did almost every day. “It’s what yo’ mammy wanted. “

It was the habitual end of the argument, and Freeland sighed, stared at the river, and dreamed of being as old as George, who was sixteen.

Alec was sympathetic to his son’s ambition. He’d never had much schooling, but had done well enough in life. He thought education was a waste of a boy’s time, but counting was important, and he’d made a promise to Tennie.

Besides, the discipline wouldn’t harm Freeland, and he was still too small to be much use on the land.

He guided the ferr y to the northern jetty, and was surprised to see the woman standing under a tree, her child still clutched to her. He felt a small sense of satisfaction. She had risen to his bait. Now she had to be hooked. He nodded a greeting to her, but she didn’t respond. Freeland helped the leaving passengers off and the new ones embark, took the fares and saw Queen.

“Y’ comin’ on, lady?” he called. “Only a nickel.”

Everyone was staring at her, because she was holding up the departure.

Queen hesitated. She wanted to go back south, she wanted the job the ferryman had talked about, she wanted food for herself and her boy, and she wanted a warm dry place to sleep. There was only one problem.

“I ain’t got a nickel,” she cried out suddenly. “I ain’t got one red cent.

I ain’t got nuttin’! “

It was passionately spoken, and everyone looked at her in astonishment, mingled with some small pity for her plight, and annoyance, because they wanted to be on their way. Alec took charge.

“Now I cain’t hardly charge you fo’ takin’ you back where you came from,”

he called. “Only don’t tell all these other niggers, else they’ll all want a free ride.”

The passengers laughed. They knew the woman would ride for free, because Alec was a kind man and she looked so poor, and they knew they’d all pay their own fares without hesitation, but with considerable, vocal complaint.

It added a spark of interest to an otherwise ordinary ferry crossing.

Queen, angry at having to reveal her poverty and furious at their laughter, made her way to the boat. She wouldn’t take charity, she told Alec grumpily. As soon as she got a job, as soon as she got back on her feet, she would repay him. Alec smiled, and agreed that was the best solution.

Queen settled on the bench and glared angrily at the other passengers.

“Y’all quit staring at me, y’hear?” she shouted. “What you

think I am, white trash? I’s black like you, so you keep yo’ eyes off me.”

Everyone looked the other way and pretended they hadn’t heard. Except Alec, who couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“An’ that goes for you too,” she shouted at him now. “You and all men, y’all got just one thing on your minds, and I ain’t got no time fo’ none of you!”

Her fury was formidable, and her performance spectacular. It drew murmurs of agreement and appreciation from the other passengers, who variously assured her that they heard her and wouldn’t look at her.

Except Alec, who simply watched her, and she, perhaps embarrassed, changed Abner to her other arm, and stared at the river.

Freeland was wide-eyed in wonder.

"Glory be, Pops," he said. "That is one meantempered woman."

"Ain't she just," Alec agreed, clearly impressed by her. They sailed south. Queen's temper was almost permanently mean these days, for she wore her troubles, her deep anger and her heartbreak, about her like a shroud, and the world responded to her in kind.

She had never gone back to Mrs. Benson, but some strikers, aware of her relationship to Davis, took pity on her, and gave her shelter. They had little else to give her because they had so little themselves, and when the strike was broken, only days later, they had even less. But their spirits, unlike Queen's, were not broken. They had not succeeded this time, but Davis had given them a sense of purpose and unity, and a belief in the future. Three years later they would strike again, and this time they would succeed, but Queen was not there for their victory. She hated Beaufort, for it reminded her of Davis, and she set off on her journey again, with no idea of where she was going, except to find some small elusive peace. She did not go North, for if she had gone there and found unhappiness again, where else was left to her? Without clearly understanding what she was doing, she headed east, back to Georgia, to Alabama, and to Florence. If she had thought about it, she would not have believed that The Forks represented any kind of sanctuary, but

she didn't think about anything anymore; her only concern was for Abner's survival, and, to a lesser extent, her own.

Without direction, without ambition, she existed, rather than lived. Her temper quickened and her speech coarsened. She accepted rides from strangers, but would not talk to them, only to her child. She hardened her heart against the world, because she had lost all sense of trust in other people. She took charity,

gracelessly, where she could find it, and begged or borrowed or stole when there was nothing else. Abner was her only consolation, and the only contact she made with anyone was for his welfare.

He settled into an extraordinary acceptance of their circumstances. He stared out at the world with round, open eyes, received gratefully all that it offered, and cried only if he was hungry and they had no food, or if he was tired and they had no bed for the night. She took jobs if she could find them, only to be dismissed because of her short temper. And yet the world was kinder to her than she allowed it to be. Folk took pity on her, perhaps because ~he was so desolate, or for the boy's sake, and she survived. She avoided anywhere that she might be known, such as Huntsville or Decatur, and tried to avoid anywhere she had been.

After a year of wandering, she came to the outskirts of Florence, and was forced to make a decision. She could go back to The Forks of Cypress and beg some shelter at least, from Jass, or Missy Sally, or she could go on.

Since going back to an unhappy past was almost worse than her surviving present, she chose to go on, but to where she did not know. She followed the river and eventually she came to Savannah. She took the ferry north, and when the ferryman talked of a job and food, her mouth watered, for she had not eaten in two days, and her body craved for shelter, for she had not slept in a bed for a week. When she got off the ferry, she walked for a few hundred yards on the northern shore, well aware of her empty purse and her hopeless position, and then turned back, to throw herself on the mercy of the ferryman.

It was the last run for the day. Soon it would be night. As Alec docked, he looked at Queen.

"Wait there," he said, nodding to the trees. Queen did as he bade, not knowing what he had in mind, but put herself in

his hands because she was beyond making a decision for herself. If he proved as venal as all men, she would defend herself, and she would survive somehow, but

at that moment, she did not know how, or for what reason, except Abner.

Alec tied up the ferry and sent Freeland home. He offered to carry Abner, but Queen would not part with the boy. He led her up the muddy path to the Cherry mansion, took her in the back way, and introduced her to Dora, who was cook and housekeeper to Mr. Cherry.

Dora was mountainous and magnificent, of brisk manner and immense heart.

She took one look at the sodden sparrow clutching her boy to her and gathered them up and cared for them as if they were her own. She made warm milk immediately, then took them into her own bedroom, next to the kitchen, and found warm dry clothes for Queen and a fresh, dry blanket for Abner. She poured a big basin of hot water for them to wash, and went back to the kitchen while Queen changed. She heated up a pot of thick stew and talked to Alec, who had made himself comfortable by the fire.

Both guessed at her circumstances without reaching any conclusions, and Alec told her that he had mentioned the job to the woman.

“Time enough fo’ that later,” Dora said to Alec, as Queen came nervously back into the kitchen. She felt a little silly in the enormous dressing gown, and still held Abner close to her, as she was wont to do in a house of strangers, however wellintentioned they appeared to be. Dora sat her at the table and put a big plate of stew in front of her, and cut some slabs of bread. Queen mushed up some meat and vegetables and fed them to Abner, making sure he was satisfied before she attended to her own hunger. She would not speak, and only answered questions with a grunt or a monosyllable, which made Alec a little cross. Thank you was not such a hard thing to say. But her devotion to the boy impressed him, and he glanced at Dora. She flicked her head at the door, suggesting he leave, for she thought Queen might respond better if she was alone with a woman.

Alec took the hint and made his good-nights. He had to be home to his brood, and see what problems the day had brought. Queen did not acknowledge his leaving.

It was clear to Dora that Abner had eaten as much as he needed, and Queen very little.

"The chile's done eatin', she said. "I'll hold him while you finish up."

But Queen would not let Abner go.

"Don't touch him," she said.

Dora was puzzled and concerned.

"Lord, girl, what you think, I'm gwine steal him from you?"

Queen shrugged. Too many people had tried to take Abner away from her already, but she had no way of explaining that.

Dora busied herself with pots and pans, and asked about her qualifications. Queen responded less curtly, and her answers satisfied Dora, who agreed she could have the job for a week, on a trial basis. It was long hours and hard work, but Mr. Cherry was a fine, fair man, and if Queen proved suitable she would be asked to stay on. There was no response, and as Dora turned from the stove, she saw Queen filching some bread from the table and stuffing it into her pocket. Again, Dora was intrigued, but made no comment about it. She saw that Abner was asleep.

"Look at that boy, fast asleep in his mammy's arms," she said. "Sweetest sight in all the world."

She sat beside Queen, to try to find some way to communicate with her.

"Is you still hungry?" she asked, and Queen shook her head. She was staring down at her plate, as if her head was too heavy to hold up upright.

"Is you tired?" Dora asked. For a moment there was no reply, but then Queen looked at her and tears were streaming down her face. She hadn't cried since the death of Davisthere was no point in it-but now in this warm kitchen, in the company of a kindly woman, with a job and not hungry anymore, a year's worth of tears found their release.

“I never been so tired in all my life,” she said. She held on to Abner and wept. She could not go to another human being for comfort, because she had been too long alone, so Dora went to her. She put her embracing arms around the unhappy woman, and held her to her bosom while she cried.

As mammies do.

Dora let Queen cry until she was done, then dried her eyes and told her everything was going to be all right now. She

might have taken her up the back stairs to her room, but she wanted Queen to have some appreciation of the job she had been offered, and led her through the main hall of the house, and up the sweeping staircase.

The hall was elegantly appointed, and fine portraits hung on the walls, reminding Queen of The Forks of Cypress. She walked up the stairs feeling as if she were back where she started, and remembered herself climbing stairs similar to this, many years ago, in the company of a woman who didn’t love her, taking her away from her mammy, who did.

“Massa won’t mind Abner being with me?” she asked Dora, who laughed.

“Do his heart good to have a chile in the house again,” she said. “This ol’ place has been all echoes and shadows since Massa Cherry’s chillun done leave home.”

She was anxious to learn what she could of Queen’s background, and pried gently.

“Don’t s’ppose you ever seen the like,” she said, referring to the magnificent hall, and the splendid portraits.

Queen’s mind was filled with ghosts.

“Oh, yes,” she nodded. “My pappy was a great man. I lived in the big house.”

It wasn’t much, but Dora thought it was a considerable breakthrough.

“Where yo’ pappy now?” she asked, as they moved across the upper hall to the second stairs. “He passed on?”

She didn’t react when she heard a soft, sad voice behind her, but the words stung her heart.

“No,” Queen said. “He didn’t love me. Because I am black. “

Her room was small, but comfortable, and blessedly warm. She made Abner comfortable under the blankets, his head on a pillow, and Dora told her to steep in the dressing gown.

“First thing tomorrow, we get you some decent clothes,” she said, thinking nothing of it. This was too much generosity for Queen, who was used to begging for it, and stealing it.

“I don’t want no charity,” she muttered angrily.

Dora was concerned. She needed help in the house and Queen had the qualifications, but under normal circumstances, she would have preferred someone with a happier personality.

She had been kind to Queen because she was a kind woman and Queen needed help, but her first loyalty was to Massa Cherry, for whom she had worked, slave and free, all her life. She also thought that too much kindness might not be the best thing for Queen.

“You listen to me, Missy,’ I she said sharply. “If you gwine work here, you gotta dress nice and look nice and be nice. You say you was raised proper and got good manners-well, you start showing it. Massa Cherry don’t want some meantempered skivvy running round the house.”

Queen turned away, sulking.

“If’n it’ll make you feel better, I’s takin’ the cost of yo’ new clothes out of yo’ wages.”

She thought she had been stem enough for the moment, so she relaxed a little.

“Coz you don’t look so good in my hand-me-downs,” she added, with a twinkle in her eye and her voice.

Her warmth of tone and commanding personality reassured Queen, who needed someone to tell her what to do.

“I’s sorry,” she whispered, and Dora laughed. She helped Queen into the bed and tucked her in. As mammies do.

The crisp, clean sheets felt wonderful to Queen, and she snuggled Abner to her, and thought she never wanted to wake up. Dora sat on the edge of the bed, and stroked her hair.

“Don’t have to worry no more,” she said softly. “You safe now. I I Queen could not accept that. She turned her head away, to look at the wall.

“Don’t belong nowhere,” she murmured.

Dora could only guess at what had happened to Queen to bring her to such desolation, but she was beginning to understand something of the forces driving her, and what she needed.

“Glory be, chile,” she said. “Everybody belong somewhere. Jus’ takes some folk a while to work out where it is.”

Still she stroked Queen’s hair, and thought of her own children, married now, with families of their own. She thanked God that she had never seen any of her girls in a state as wretched as Queen’s.

She began to hum a gentle lullaby, which slowly formed into soft, loving words.

Queen drifted to sleep with Abner in her arms, while Dora sat with her, and lulled her with childhood songs.

As mammies do.

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When Alec got home that evening, it was to the usual domestic chaos. He employed a girl, Little Bit, as part-time housekeeper, but she was a foolish, dreaming girl, lazy and difficult, and far too young to be surrogate mother to Alec's children. For although Minnie, his eldest girl, was useful around the house, Freeland was too full of youthful energy to be anything but a nuisance, and Julie was not old enough to help anyone.

George, who lived with them in the shed at the back of the shack, did his best, but was young himself, and often tired from his long hours on the farm. No matter how much love Alec tried to show his children, no matter how many speeches of mutual cooperation he made, no matter how much authority he gave Little Bit over the household, she was hardly older than her charges, and there was constant bickering and general unhappiness.

Tonight, the dinner was late.

"Lord sakes, Little Bit," Alec said tetchily, "they should have et an hour ago."

Little Bit thought she had worked hard, and resented his constant griping.

"I cain't do everything," she complained as she always did. "I bin here fo' hours cookin' an' cleanin', an' I's dog tired."

Although she wasn't too tired to look forward to her date that night with her

new boyfriend. Rather than argue with her, Alec gave in, for it had been a long day.

“All right, Little Bit,” he said. “You go on home. I’ll see to everything. “

Little Bit needed no second bidding, and grabbed her hat and coat.

“Time you had a new wife to slave for yo’,” she sniffed as she walked out of the door.

Alec’s presence and Little Bit’s departure calmed the children, and Minnie organized everyone in helping with the dinner. She and Alec served the meat and beans, and cooked the turnip greens, while Freeland and Julie laid the table, and George did his best to tidy up, but he was tall for his age and got in everyone’s way. As they ate their dinner, the youngsters complained of Little Bit, giggling that she was a little bit worse than useless, until Alec told them to shush. They sat together as a family for a while and told their father their stories of the day, and then one by one, Alec dispatched them to bed. Minnie and Julie slept in a small room at the back of the shack, and Freeland shared the shed with George. Alec said prayers with the young ones, tucked them in, and kissed them good night.

He looked at the shack and shook his head. The children were right, Little Bit was a little bit worse than useless; the place looked like it hadn’t been properly cleaned in weeks. He thought sadly of Tennie, who had kept the little house in such apple-pie order. He was too tired to tackle the mess, and went outside to sit on the porch with George, as was their evening ritual.

The rain had eased and it was a pleasant night. Alec sat in his old rocking chair, and puffed on his pipe. George was comfortable on the steps. There was another, empty rocker next to Alec, but no one ever sat in that, for it had been Tennie’s chair.

They talked for a while about George’s day, and the prospect of a plentiful

crop that year, then lapsed into reflective silence.

“Dey’s need a mammy,” George said after a while, and Alec nodded.

“An’ you need a wife,” George said after another small silence.

Alec knew that was true, but wasn’t quite ready to admit it yet.

“Watch yo’ mouth,” he told George, affectionately cross.

George grinned, Alec was more than his employer, his boss; he was like a father to George, who had never known one.

“Y’ cain’t leave it fo’ever,” he said, untroubled by Alec’s admonition.

“You’s gettin’ old, an’ one day you gwine wake up and be too old.”

“Hush yo’ mouth, I said,” Alec told him again, for George had hit a raw nerve. “Y’ain’t so big I cain’t whump you.”

George grinned again, for he was already bigger than Alec. “Like to see you try,” he said. He got to his feet, said his good-nights to Alec, and went to the shed.

Alec sat alone, puffing on his pipe and staring at the night. It was bad enough that Dora was always telling him to find another wife, and Massa Cherry, and most of his friends, but now even George was on about it.

The image of a tiny, frightened woman with a child on her hip came into his mind, and he felt protective toward her, and intrigued by her, and wanted to know more about her.

“Dadgummit,” he said softly.

He saw her the following afternoon, back from a shopping expedition into

town with Dora, to buy new clothes, and he smiled and waved, but she ignored him. Dora looked at him knowingly and shook her head. Alec decided not to speak to Queen for a few days, until she was in better temper, but he thought about her often when he was steering his ferryboat across the river, and once was in such a reverie that he almost forgot to slow down the boat and came close to smashing into the jetty. Only the shouts of his passengers brought his attention back to the business at hand.

Mr. Cherry returned from a business trip to Memphis, and was introduced to his new housemaid. Usually his wife handled all the domestic matters, but she was visiting relations in New York. Wearing a smart black dress and white apron and cap, Queen looked lovely, fit and rested, but she was still suspicious of kindness and generosity. Mr. Cherry bade her welcome to his house, and hoped she would be happy with them. If she worked hard and well, she could be with them for a long time.

“Oh, I ain’t staying,” Queen said, to Mr. Cherry’s surprise.

No, sir, Massa. Soon as I’s back on my feet, I’s going North, to start a flower shop.”

It was the dream that she clung to, her defense against the world.

“I understood from Dora that it was to be a more permanent situation,” Mr.

Cherry said, slightly offended by her manner.

” No, sir,” Queen insisted. “I ain’t planning to be a kitchen skivvy all my life.”

The edge to her manner was so sharp and dismissive, she managed to rile even the tolerant Mr. Cherry. He nodded as if in approval of her ambition, but sent her back to work.

“Be that as it may,” he said, “I’m paying you as a maid, so perhaps you should be about your business.”

“Yes, suh!” Queen snapped impudently. “I’s going now, suh! “

Mr. Cherry very seldom lost his temper, but he came close to it, briefly.

He went into his study and rang for Dora to find out if the new maid was always so bad-tempered.

She was. She worked hard and well, but no one, except occasionally Dora, could get a smile from her. She snapped at everyone else for imagined slights, and spent her free time in her room with Abner. She kept him there when she was working, and sat him on her knee when she was eating her meals in the kitchen. Gradually, she began to trust Dora sufficiently to keep an eye on the boy, but otherwise she would not let anyone near him. Especially not Alec.

Alec found some pretext to call at the house almost every day, to discuss business with Mr. Cherry, or gossip in the kitchen with Dora. He tried hard to find some conversation with Queen but was always rebuffed.

” You lookin’ better,” he said to her, as he often did, for he could not think of any other opening.

She would sniff and find something else to do, or walk away, and if Abner was near she would pick him up and remove him from Alec’s vicinity. Her exclusion of them began to get on everyone’s nerves.

But Abner excluded no one. A quiet and reserved child when he first arrived, he blossomed into a happy, chubby boy, had a smile and a laugh for everyone, and was especially fond of Alec.

He accepted his mother’s absences at work, but was hap-

piest when he was near her, or anyone. One warm day, he was sitting on a rug in

the garden, while Queen put carpets over the line and beat them, to get the dust out of them. The sun was shining, the gardener was working in the vegetable plot, and Abner was playing happily with a toy that Dora had given him.

Only Queen was immune to the general goodwill, and thwacked the carpets vigorously, as if she were beating everyone who had ever done her harm.

Alec had been working on his land, and was on his way home for the midday meal. He had stopped in the kitchen to deliver some fresh beans to Dora, and when he came out he saw Queen. He decided to vary his ritual approach.

“Pretty day,” he said, for it was the prettiest of days.

Queen didn’t respond.

“How’s the job?” Alec asked. Queen was fed up. It was a pretty day, but she had to work, and didn’t want to be reminded of it.

“If’n you’re looking for me to say thanks fo’ getting me the job, or summat,” she said, still hitting the carpet, “you can forget it. I’d have managed, somehow.”

“Sure you would,” Alec agreed, but did not leave. He couldn’t work out why he felt so protective toward this wretched, ill-mannered woman. His continued presence irritated Queen even more.

“Ain’t you got a ferry to run?” she called as she beat.

“Saturday, George and my boy Freeland do it. I work the land,” he told her. “Ain’t the biggest block of land, but with the ferry, we get by. “

“How well you do or how well you don’t do, ain’t nothin’ to do with me,”

Queen snapped, refusing to be drawn by him. Because she wouldn’t look at him, she didn’t see that Abner had toddled over to Alec, and was tugging on his jacket for attention. Alec looked down at him.

“Well, now, young fella,” he said, picking Abner up, what’s your name?”

He knew Abner’s name but had not been introduced, and wanted to make contact with the boy.

Queen turned and saw her beloved son in Alec's arms, and she panicked.

She dropped the carpet beater and ran to Abner, grabbed him from Alec.

"You leave him be!" Queen shouted at Alec. "He's mine, and no one ever going to take him away from me."

Alec was astonished by her ferocity, and Dora, who had come out to talk to the gardener, looked on in amazement.

"Lord, woman, I was jus' askin' his name," Alec protested, but Queen hardly heard him.

"He ain't no business of your'n," she cried, and took Abner into the house.

Alec was baffled and hurt by Queen's reaction, and looked at Dora.

"Abner," Dora said calmly. "The chile's called Abner."

Alec nodded, for he knew that. "Fine name fo' a boy," he said. "Biblical."

He walked home to his shack puzzling at the depth of Queen's unhappiness, and while part of him wanted nothing more to do with her, part of him was determined to discover the reason for her distress. He lost his temper with Little Bit, who had taken it on herself to spank Julie for some trivial naughtiness, and he sacked her.

Dora, who was as puzzled as Alec by Queen's behavior, took the gardener to task for the scrawny carrots he had picked.

"Yes, m'm, Miss Dora, dey's the biggest I c'n find," the gardener said to placate her. He was used to her.

But Abner cried, and Queen could not comfort him. Abner didn't understand why his mammy had dragged him away from the nice man. But then Abner was

luckier than Queen. Abner knew he was home.

“She been hurt bad,” Dora told Alec. They were sitting in the kitchen, shelling peas. “She got a bellyful of anger against the world. 7’

Alec nodded, popping more peas into his mouth than into the pan.

“But Massa Cherry like a happy house,” Dora cautioned. “She carry on like this, she won’t have a job.”

She slapped Alec’s hand, for eating too many of the peas.

It came to a head at a formal dinner party that Mr. Cherry gave. A gregarious and hospitable host, he kept a fine table, and enjoyed good conversation. Because of his position in the county, his guests were of some standing, though not necessarily of good manners.

Queen was serving, and a female guest snapped her fingers and demanded water. Perhaps it was the finger snap that grated on Queen, or perhaps she was tired, but when she poured the water, a little of it spilled on the woman’s dress.

The woman shouted at Queen impatiently, demanding cloths to clean up the mess, and turned to the other guests.

“These nigras!” she said disparagingly. “Nothing’s been the same since the war.”

The thoughtless comment made Mr. Cherry angry, and he was about to chide his guest, but Queen got there first.

“I ain’t a nigra!” she exclaimed. “My pappy was white, and his pappy afore him, all the way back to Ireland.”

Her explosion caused a startled silence at the dinner table, and in the silence Queen felt her frustration rising. It was true that she had as much Irish blood in her as black blood; she didn't feel Irish, and she wasn't treated as Irish, but why was she considered more black than Irish? She knew she'd said too much already, but she couldn't stop herself from saying more.

" Just because I got an itty bit of black blood in me, you think you can snap yo' fingers at me like a dog and have me dancing to yo' beck and call." She was shouting now, unstoppable.

- Well, if you take yo' family tree, you'll mebbe find you've got an itty-bitty little bit of black blood in you," she told the amazed woman.

"And even if you ain't, that don't give you the right to call people names."

- Queen, that will do!" Mr. Cherry told her sharply. "Since you cannot control yourself, go to the kitchen, and send Dora to serve, -

It was a hard, sharp order, and Queen stared at him for a moment, still angry and unapologetic for what she done, but understanding that she had gone too far. Although she would admit it to no one, she had come to respect and admire Mr. Cherry, and was furious at herself for having embarrassed him. Pride would not let her apologize, and she did as she was told.

Dora was as angry with Queen, and would have sacked her if she had not needed the help. She went into the dining room, where Queen's outburst was the main topic of conversation, and the insulted guest was demanding Queen's dismissal. Mr.

Cherry promised that he would have strong words with Queen, and looked at Dora, but another guest managed to calm things down.

"She could be right though, Daphne, old girl," he said happily to the victim of Queen's wrath. "You never know what your father or grandfather might have

got up to with those slave girls."

A few others chuckled, and the atmosphere calmed down a little, but Daphne was doubly insulted now, for it was true. Her grandfather had got up to some nonsense with a slave girl. It was the shame of her family.

"Don't be vulgar, Charles," she said.

After his guests had gone, Mr. Cherry called Queen to him, and gave her a stem lecture.

"She insulted me," Queen said sullenly.

"Be that as it may, it is not your place to berate my guests, no matter how they behave," Mr. Cherry insisted. "Unless you can keep your temper under control in future, I shall have to make other arrangements.' I Which is what Queen had thought would happen from the moment she got the job. It had happened to her so many times before, and she was ready for the inevitable.

"That suits mejus' fine," she said, and left the room.

Dora was ready to go after her and give her a piece of her mind, for she could not tolerate ingratitude, but Mr. Cherry stopped her. As always, his heart got the better of his common sense, and he, despite all appearances to the contrary, liked Queen, and had admired the logic behind her outburst, if not the way she had done it.

Edgar Cherry's position had always been something of a paradox, even to himself. Raised in the South, he had owned slaves, and they had helped him make his fortune, but he had enjoyed a lib~ral education in the North, and despised the practice. He could not understand why any human being could believe others inferior simply because of their race, or the color of their skin. He was good to his slaves, and gave several their freedom, but believed that only wealth and influence could bring about change, and the slaves were the key to his fortune. Like Queen and so many others, he puzzled constantly

that it only took one tiny drop of black blood to set someone apart from their peers, and Queen's claim that she was actually as much Irish as black had amused him greatly. He had became a devout abolitionist, working to subvert the system from within, to bring his fellow Southerners to an understanding of the terrible injustice they were inflicting on the black race, but made little headway against the pervasive, ruling system. The war gave him the chance to put his ideals into action. He welcomed the Union troops, allowed his house to be used by their officers, and sent some of his slaves behind Rebel lines, to act as spies. He freed his slaves with the announcement of the Emancipation Act, and it pleased him that many chose to stay with their former Massa. It depressed him that the attitude of most whites had not been changed by the war, but while he applauded Queen, he could not tolerate her rudeness, for he believed that such behavior encouraged intolerance, not diminished it.

Queen sat in her room, shaking with tangled emotions, and rocking Abner, who sensed his mother's distress, and cried. His distress only added to her own, for he would not be comforted, and Queen could find no way to alleviate her own distress. Her life was following its usual pattern, and she believed it was only a matter of days before she would be dismissed and on the road again. To heaven knows where.

What distressed her most was that she did not want to go. Somewhere deep inside herself she understood that this job, this house, and this place represented the best chance for some small security in her life. The possibility of that chance being snatched away from her, largely by her own intemperate actions, caused her mind to cringe in fear for the future. But she did not understand that she could change that future, for she did not know how to change herself.

She stared at the empty fireplace, and suddenly flames exploded in it, and burst into life, flames of the torches of relentless pursuers, and flames of a burning barn, and flames engulfing the body of the man she had loved, who was father to her son.

Dora had her say the following morning, when she took Queen into town to shop. As usual, Queen brought Abner with her, and her obsessive refusal to be parted from the boy began to annoy Dora. He would have been quite happy back at the mansion, in the care of one of the gardeners, but when she mentioned it, Queen became sullen again. Expertly driving the small gig, Dora flicked her whip at the horse to relieve the frustration she felt with this obstinate woman.

"Gwine have to let go of the boy some day," she said, and saw Queen's face redden. "He cain't go through life thinkin' his mammy is his only home."

"I'm all he's got. I'm the only one who loves him," Queen muttered.

Dora saw her chance, and turned on Queen.

"Now you may not know who you are, missy," she said, "black, white, yalla, or sky-blue pink, and it don't matter a hoot the color of yo' skin, because I know what you are. If'n you think you c'n keep that boy in a glass case the rest of his life, then you are a fool, girl. The biggest dang fool on this earth, that's what you are."

Queen was equally angry. "Abner the only one who love me," she cried. "No one going to take that away from me."

"It's high time you worked out who your friends are, missy," Dora snapped, her frustration with Queen flooding out. "Massa Cherry's a good man, who's been kind enough to give you a job and a home. Well, home is where you are loved, and there's folk here would love you, if'n you gave them a chance.

So it's high time you let go the pain that's eatin' you. It's time you let someone love you."

She brought the gig to a halt outside the butcher's shop and the boy came running out to hold the horse's head.

“You wait here,” Dora said to Queen. “Y’ain’t good company today.” She heaved her vast self out of the gig, and turned back to Queen for a parting shot.

“Y’ain’t good company too many days,” she said, and went inside.

Queen sat in the gig and pulled Abner closer to her. If everyone was going to be angry with her all the time, it might be better to leave the job now, of her own volition. But she didn’t want to do that. If she had to go, she’d rather be sacked, for that would feed her resentment and her pain. But, oh, she wanted to be rid of the pain.

She glanced at the boy holding the horse’s head. He was very light-skinned, and could have passed for white, but Queen guessed that he was not. Two middle-aged women passing by didn’t have such good eyesight.

“I’ll never get used to it,” one said to the other. “White boys holding horses, and white girls working as mammies to pickaninnies. “

It was said loudly enough for Queen and the boy to hear, and it was meant to hurt. But it had the opposite effect. The butcher’s boy glanced at Queen and smiled, for he knew her blood was similar to his own. She smiled back at him, as if they both shared a great secret. Then both of them started to giggle, and to laugh.

Dora, waiting for the butcher to select his choicest cuts, glanced out of the shop window and saw the happy Queen.

“Lord a’ mercy,” Dora said to no one. “She almost pretty when she laugh.”

She told Alec about that laughter when he called in for his usual Saturday visit. He was tired. Keeping house without Little Bit was only marginally more

difficult than keeping house with Little Bit, but he needed someone, and couldn't find anyone to take her place.

"You need a wife," Dora said. "Yo' chillun needs a mammy."

She'd said it before, a thousand times, and would go on saying it until he did something about it.

"The silly thing is," she added, as if the idea had only just occurred to her, "I know a Fil boy that needs a pappy. An' a woman that needs a man."

Alec started at her. She couldn't mean Queen, that meantempered, moody, no-account critter who wouldn't give him the time of day. But he knew she did, and for all Queen's faults, the idea was not completely alien to him.

"I ain't in the market, I tol' you," he said, apparently dismissing the subject, but actually wondering what Queen looked like when she smiled.

He didn't convince Dora. - Uh-huh," she groaned. "You tol' me a thousand times, an' I still don't believe you."

Alec lost his temper. "She don't even give me the time of day!

"P'raps you ain't asked her right." Dora was very smug. She'd only thought of the possibility of a union between Alec and Queen as a bolt from the blue, but having had the idea it made absolute sense to her. "Lovey-dovey stuff ain't gwine get to her. She needs someone as meantempered as she is."

She looked at her friend with enormous affection. She thought of him as a gentle grizzly bear.

"An' Lord knows, you can be the meanest-tempered man in this county."

Alec snorted in derision, and then smiled, because he knew he could be

irascible. Even if he dismissed the idea of Queen as a potential wife, she might make an excellent housekeeper, especially if a small part of the love she directed so completely at Abner could be at least partly shared with a few other children. His children. He had no idea how this could be achieved.

Abner solved the problem for him. It was a warrn day, and Queen had put him in the garden, on the rug. She thought him safe, for even if he could toddle to the garden gate, he couldn't unlatch it, so she went back in the house to finish some chores. She did not intend to be gone for very long, but she was gone for long enough.

Alec walked through the garden on his way home, and Abner saw the nice man that he liked, and toddled after him. Alec opened the gate and told Abner to go home to his mammy, but Abner wouldn't be told. He took Alec's hand and walked with him through the gate. Alec looked at the house, in two minds what to do. He knew that Abner's absence would make Queen even angrier than usual, but there would

be nothing unusual in temper. He believed that the boy needed to get away from his mother's apron strings, and Abner seemed to be of the same opinion. And if Abner was absent for a while, and then was found, it might persuade Queen that other people could be trusted to look after him. On balance, and with a lot of rationalization, he decided that no harm could come from it, and perhaps a little good. He would send Minnie to tell Queen, or Dora, where the boy was. Still, he left the decision to Abner.

He began walking slowly down the track, and Abner stayed with him, chattering to himself in a language that only he could understand.

But a mile is a long way for a toddling boy, especially when there are so many interesting things to see, and a nice man to talk to. He inspected every tree and looked at every flower, and after a little while he got tired, so Alec picked him

up and carried him the rest of the way home.

Queen came out of the house and saw that Abner wasn't on his rug.

Immediately, her heart beat a little faster, and she went searching for him through the garden, calling out his name. When she couldn't find him, she went back to the house and burst into the kitchen, calling for Abner.

Dora had not seen the boy, and was concerned on his, and Queen's, behalf.

"Cain't be too far away," she said, and went out with Queen into the garden to continue the search. Queen ran through the property crying out his name, and begging him not to play games with his mammy. When she saw that the back gate was unlatched, her heart almost stopped, for the path beyond the gate led to the river. She saw the gardener coming up the path, and called out to him, but he scratched his head; he hadn't seen the boy. Queen was sure that something untoward had happened to Abner.

If he'd wandered down to the river, he might have fallen in, and he was only little, he couldn't swim.

"Oh, sweet Lord, no," she begged, and ran down the path to the river.

There was no sign of Abner anywhere. She saw George helping passengers onto the ferry, and called out to him and them.

"My little boy's lost!" she cried. "Has anybody seen him? "

George and the passengers shook their heads, and fell into a discussion about what might have happened to the child, and everyone looked at the river. Queen was becoming frantic; she ran up and down the shore calling his name, and passengers tried to help her and calm her. They promised to organize a search.

Then Minnie appeared at the top of the hill, and George asked her if she had seen Abner.

“I see’d him,” Minnie confirmed, and Queen ran to her, grabbed at her, and begged where.

“At my pappy’s place,” Minnie said, surprised at the commotion. Abner had come home with her pappy, and was perfectly all right. She’d been sent to tell Queen and Dora where the boy was.

With the news that Abner was safe, Queen’s emotion changed. She became immediately suspicious.

“What’s he doin’ there?” she asked, but Minnie was slightly frightened by the fuss, and shook her head.

“Don’t rightly know, m’m,” she said. “But he there, safe as can be.”

Abner was indeed safe and happy and having the best time. He was sitting on the nice man’s knee, on a chair that rocked backward and forward, and the nice man was telling him a story. Abner didn’t understand what the story was all about; he didn’t know what a tortoise was, nor a hare, but it was fun.

Alec had given him lemonade, and played with him, and then settled to tell him fables. He was at the end of the one about the tortoise and the hare when he heard a furious yelling of Abner’s name in the distance, and Queen appeared, running down the track.

Queen hardly paused when she saw Abner, but ran to him, and grabbed him from Alec’s lap.

“Jus’ tellin’ him stories,” Alec said calmly.

But Queen didn’t want him to tell Abner stories; she wanted him to keep away from her boy, and demanded to know how he had got here. He couldn’t have toddled all this way on his own.

“He’s here, ain’t he?” Alec said, filling his pipe with tobacco. His resolute

calm in the face of what had been, to

Queen, a considerable crisis, infuriated her. She lost her temper, said she was sick of the whole world knowing what was better for her child than she did; she was sick of this place, and as soon as she had enough money saved, she would be on her way. With Abner. With that, feeling she'd had the satisfactory final word, she stomped away.

"How much do you need?" Alec asked quietly, and that made her madder still. She rounded on him, because she'd told him before that she didn't want charity, and if he was still worried about the nickel she owed him for the ferry ride, he'd get it back with interest. This riled Alec, but he did not forget his purpose.

"We'll all be right glad to see the back o' yo' bad temper," he snapped.

"An' if'n it'll get you on your way a little quicker, I need someone to work for me."

Queen laughed in derision. She wouldn't work for him if he was the last man on earth, but what did it involve? Alec shrugged that he needed a part-time housekeeper for his children.

"Tho' why I'd wish yo' mean ol' ways on them, I surely don't know."

Queen had stopped walking away, but she wasn't sure why. She didn't want to stay in Savannah, but she didn't want to leave. She was suspicious of Alec, but she didn't know why. She was sure there was more to Abner's disappearance than he was telling her, but he had been kind to her, and found her the job with Massa Cherry. She had no intention of working for him, because she didn't need a job, she had one. But she still cherished the fantasy that as soon as she was back on her financial feet she could move on, and a few hours part-time work would speed that day. And she wasn't sure how long she would keep her job with Massa Cherry, for she knew she was on trial with him. She was doing her best to be pleasant to him, but she wasn't sure how long she could keep that up.

"How much?" she asked cautiously. They negotiated in anger, and settled on a

figure that was sufficient but not large, and agreed on a starting time, which was now. Queen had a few conditions of her own.

“But I don’t want to talk to you, ‘cept when I have to,” she insisted.

“An’ you keep away from my boy.”

“Suits me fine,” Alec agreed.

Queen looked at him for a moment, deciding if he could be trusted, and reached a positive conclusion. She went into the house, and had things summed up in a trice. She put little Julie in charge of Abner, and when Minnie came home, somewhat nervously, Queen put her in charge of Julie and Abner.

Alec sat rocking on the porch, puffing on his pipe, wondering what he had got himself into.

87

Within days, Alec’s children adored her. She was careful and cautious with them, but firm and kind. It was an enormous relief to Minnie and Julie to have a woman to talk to, and they almost swamped her with an accumulation of love, and adored Abner, and played mother to him. George accepted her happily and willingly, for she represented a longed-for maternal figure in his life, and only Freeland resisted her presence, but not for long.

Dora was pleased by the new arrangement, and gave it her blessing, provided it did not interfere with Queen’s duties at the mansion. Queen assured her it would not; she would work evenings and Saturday afternoons for Alec, and work doubly hard to make sure her duties at the mansion were attended to.

Mr. Cherry was a mildly dissenting voice, worried that Queen would not be able to do the two jobs, and that she would not have any time to herself, but the almost immediate change in Queen's attitude persuaded him not to interfere.

- Good Lord," he said to Dora. "She's almost pretty when she smiles. " Dora nodded smugly.

Her relationship with Alec took longer to improve. She kept her word, and spoke to him only when she had to, and he kept his part of the bargain, except at night, when she left the shack to go home, and he always spoke to her first.

He sat on the porch every night, puffing on his pipe and

rocking in his chair. Queen came out of the house, and he thought she looked tired.

"Take the weight off yo' feet," he said, indicating the other rocking chair. Tennie's chair.

Queen was very tired and very tempted, but she wasn't ready to relax with him, and refused.

"Jus' askin' you to sit!" he grumbled. He wasn't going to bite her; he was just asking her to sit for a while. Or was she too scared of him to do that?

The truth of it hurt Queen, and she began to lose her temper for the first time since she had started working for him, so she sat on the very edge of the rocker.

"Happy?" she said angrily.

"At least you sittin'," he said.

There was silence.

"What you want to talk about?" Queen demanded.

"Nuttin'," Alec said gruffly.

They sat in silence and talked of nothing, and Queen relaxed, and leaned back in the chair. They rocked together in silence, and it was pleasant to both of them. Then Queen got scared because it was too pleasant. She got up to leave.

“How’s the savings goin’?” Alec asked her.

“Getting there,” Queen replied steadily. “I’m getting there. “

The hours were long and the work was hard, but it was rewarding in ways that had nothing to do with money. Queen’s heart went out to the motherless children, and she identified with them, for she remembered her own desolation and loneliness after Easter died. She understood why Freeland resisted her, and she did nothing special to try to win his love, but treated him with scrupulous fairness, as she treated the others. It was not that Freeland didn’t like her. but he was shy of this new authority figure in his life, who was not his real mammy. He longed for love from her, but did not know if she could give him what he needed, because he perceived her as hired help, not as family, and was frightened of opening his heart to her. She might leave, as his real mammy had done.

He played challenging games of discipline with her, to try her, and to his surprise she always passed his tests. The longer she

stayed, the more he trusted her, and the more he tried to work her into the fabric of his heart, but he was still confused. He didn’t understand why he had to have a bath in front of her, for example.

It was bath night, Friday night, and Queen was soaping Abner in the big old bathtub. Minnie and Julie were done, and tucked up in bed. George was fixing a broken chair-his baththime was later-and Freeland was slowly removing his clothes.

“Why cain’t I have a bath on my own, like George?” he asked, reluctant to take off his pants.

“Coz George is older,” Queen told him. “He’s a man.”

“I’s nearly a man too,” Freeland insisted, and Queen understood his problem.

“I guess you nearly are,” she said sympathetically, although Freeland was still some way from puberty. “All right. I’ll turn my back.”

She turned away from him, and the grateful Freeland dropped his pants and slipped into the soapy water. Queen turned back and lifted Abner out to dry him. Freeland still felt the need to confirm his manhood to Queen.

“Couple of years, I’ll be old enough to work on the farm,” he said. “Then no mo’ school. I hates school.”

George, working on the chair, chuckled, and Queen was surprised.

“I sorry to hear that, Freeland,” she said. “Why you hate it?”

“Jus’ coz,” he shrugged.

“Jus’ coz he ain’t too good at it,” George murmured, the devil in him, and Freeland flicked some soapy water at him.

“Am too,” he muttered.

Queen, drying Abner on her lap, chatted to him about school. She suggested he play a game with school, and Freeland was intrigued. He liked games.

” ‘Stead of going to school thinking you’re going to hate it,” Queen suggested, hoping she didn’t sound as if she were preaching. “Why not go wondering if there’s anything interesting you can learn? Will you do that for me?”

Freeland shrugged. It wasn’t the most exciting game, but he’d give it a try, even if only a halfhearted one.

“Good boy,” Queen said. “And in return, I’ll let you bathe yourself, and stay up later each night, like George.” Freeland thought that was a pretty good bargain.

She tucked him into bed, in the shed, kissed him good night, and came back into the main room of the shack. George had finished the chair and was testing it.

“Freeland ain’t never gwine like school.” He smiled at Queen. She sat with him, and found out the way of it. Boys went to school because they had to, up to fifth grade, or sixth grade at most, and then they left and worked the land, sharecropping for their fathers, or entered a trade.

“What if he’s good at school?” Queen wondered. “What if he likes it? What if he ain’t good at farming?”

“Don’t happen,” George shrugged. “Be a terrible waste of a good pair of hands.”

Queen’s primary concern was for Abner. She had no idea what he would be when he grew up, but she was determined he was going to have a good education. She remembered Cap’n Jack, and how he had taught her, and she regretted she had not had the opportunity to learn more.

She said good night to George, picked up Abner from the cot, and went outside, to go home.

Alec was sitting on the porch as he always did at night, puffing on his pipe and staring at the stars. Queen came out to him and sat in Tennie’s chair, as she always did. They rocked in unison, and talked of the children, and of the farm. It was going to be a good season.

“You work hard for it,” Queen said.

Alec nodded. “I do,” he agreed, He looked at Queen.

“So do you.”

She nodded her agreement.

They tdiked of Massa Cherry, and Dora, and the mansion and the town, and then Queen got up to leave.

“Best be on my way,” she said.

“How’s the savings going?” Alec asked her.

“Getting there,” Queen said steadily. “I’m getting there.”

Christmas came and it was the most wonderful festival she had ever experienced. For the first time in her life she had a family who loved her to share her Christmas with. She gave

presents to everyone, and they gave gifts to her, and she cried a little at the mutual generosity. Minnie and Julie helped her cook a special Christmas dinner, a fine big turkey with all the trimmings, and everyone helped wash up. Abner fell asleep on Alec’s bed, and Queen didn’t see the point of waking him up to go home, so she tucked him in with Minnie and Julie. She went outside and sat with Alec.

“Where’s Abner?” he asked her in surprise, and she told him that there didn’t seem to be any point in waking the boy, that Minnie and Julie would look after him until tomorrow. Alec nodded in satisfaction, for he knew this was a major step for Queen.

” How’s the savings going?” he asked her, to make her feel secure. Queen looked at the stars, and nodded her head slowly, but she did not speak.

It was odd to go home without Abner, but she knew he was in good hands, at home. She laughed, and thought that she had two homes, a little room in the mansion where she slept, and a wooden shack down the road where she lived, and was loved. She began to think that one day she might have to make a

decision as to which was ‘ her real home, but thought perhaps she already knew. The immensity of that decision and its ramifications frightened her, and suddenly she wanted to run back to the shack, snatch Abner away, and bring him home to his mammy, but she didn’t. She consoled herself with the thought that it was all out of her hands. She was happy with her life as it was, and unless Alec did something to disturb that, she didn’t have to make a decision of any kind. If anything were to change, she still had her escape. The lifeline that he threw her every night by asking about her savings, which indicated that he accepted she would one day leave, was her salvation. Even if she knew it was a pretense.

She glanced at the little fire in the grate, and the flames were steady and calm, and did not leap into her mind. She knew that the fire demons inside her were not dead, only sleeping, but that, in itself, was a considerable advance.

The cold days of winter gave way to spring, and now Queen was such a permanent fixture in Alec’s shack, her working positions were reversed. She worked full time for Alec, and

part time for Massa Cherry. To an extent she maintained her job with Massa Cherry so she could keep her room in the mansion, for that, like Alec’s constant questioning about her savings, was an escape from something she was not yet ready to commit to.

She loved to take the children shopping on Saturdays, for then they seemed like a real family. Alec changed the work schedule so that Freeland could have the day off, with George, while he ran the ferry.

They’d buy the weekly provisions, and talk with all their friends in town, and Queen would take them all out to tea, or find them a treat.

Candy apples were their favorite, and although Queen could make them better, buying them from the store was a favorite, tiny extravagance. On the

Fourth of July she took them all to the fair, and Alec gave her a special allowance, so they could go on all the rides. They had a splendid day, although Abner was sick from eating too much, and in the late afternoon they headed for home, to eat with their father and then come back to see the fireworks.

Scores ofcarriages and carts were lined up outside the fairgrounds, with people coming and going, and suddenly there was a cry for help.

Someone had let off some premature firecrackers, and a frightened horse had broken loose and was dragging its young white rider with it, the boy's foot caught in the stirrup,

People were screaming and running out of the way. Without a moment's hesitation, George ran at the horse, grabbed its reins and hung on, trying to drag the terrified animal to calm. The horse, bucking and rearing, smashed George against a fence, but he held on.

Others came running to help, subdued the horse and rescued the boy, who was scared and bruised, but otherwise unharmed. Queen's only thought was for George. Followed by her children, for she thought of them all as her own, she ran to him. He was lying on the ground, grimacing in pain, his leg broken.

The white boy's hysterical mother had found her son, and was clutching him to her. He, shaken by his adventure but rather proud of it, insisted he was all right.

"That nigger saved me," he said. His mother came rushing to Queen, and thanked her profusely, asked after George's welfare.

"I think his leg's broke," Queen said. The mother, more interested in her son's welfare than George's, drifted away, calling for help for the poor nigger. Other, kinder, black men volunteered their help and their advice.

Someone had a cart, and carefully they laid George into it, to take him and his

family home.

At the shack, they carried George inside, while Queen organized the children. She sent Freeland to tell his father, and told Minnie and Julie to take Abner to Dora, at the mansion.

But Freeland did not go. He was staring at the shack, and tears were rolling down his cheeks. Queen put her arm around him.

” He gwine be all right, Queen?” Freeland stammered through his tears, for George was his hero. Like any good mother, Queen folded him into her embrace, and dried his tears, and told him to go fetch his pa. She would look after George, and he would be all right. She promised.

George was lying on Alec’s cot, sweating and moaning gently. One of the black men who had brought him in offered to go for his brother, who could set bones. Queen shook her head. She could do it. She sent the men to find pieces of wood and cloth, and sat with George.

She stroked his forehead, and he smiled that it was bad, and apologized to her, but held on to her hand.

11 No need to be sorry,” Queen assured him gently. “That’s what I’m here for.”

She smiled, and kissed him tenderly.

“That’s what mammys are for.”

George knew it was a lie, for she was not his mammy, but it was sweet to him. The men had found suitable pieces of wood and cloth, and Queen told George that it would hurt, but she had nothing to give him, there was no liquor in the house.

George nodded, and the men held him down while Queen felt his fractured leg. She found the break, and caressed it for a while, crooning softly to George, who gritted his teeth. Suddenly, and with a strength and sureness that surprised the men who were watching, she set the bone.

Alec came home with Freeland and it was all done. George was asleep, his leg

in makeshift splints. Dora came by to see if she could help, and took Freeland back to the mansion to

eat with the others, as a special treat. Queen made a scratch meal for the men who had helped her, which they ate gratefully, and after some small conversation, they drifted off to their homes.

Queen sat rocking on the porch with Alec. The sun had gone down; the night was clear and the moon full. They rocked in silent unison for a while, with Alec puffing on his pipe, and it felt good to both of them. Although she understood much of the complexity and depth of her relationship with Alec and his family, she had never thought of him as a husband or bed partner. She had come to love him, but not in the way that she had loved Davis. It was a different sort of love, with mutuality as its basis, mutual trust, mutual loneliness, and mutual need. She admired him and respected him, and believed he felt the same about her. She knew that Alec would protect and cherish her, defend her and provide for her, and she would respond in kind. If passion was missing from the equation, perhaps that was no bad thing, for in its place was something of infinitely greater value to her.

She regarded her new family as one of misfits: the orphan George, who had become like a son to her, the motherless children of Alec, the widowed father, and she, the dispossessed black who looked white, and mother to a boy whose father was dead. The mutuality of need extended beyond herself and Alec; it embraced all of them. The puzzle now was the next step.

Would it be more than it was, or was that enough? Was this as much as God gave? It was almost as if Alec was not prepared to test that limit, and Queen was not anxious that he should, lest she lose what she had.

“You got another pipe?” Queen asked him eventually.

Alec was only mildly surprised, and reached for a corncob pipe from the.

window ledge behind him. He gave it to Queen, and she sucked on it. He offered her his tobacco, but she shook her head. It was fine as it was.

They rocked some more in silence, and Alec was moved by what had happened that day, and deeply grateful that this woman had come into his life.

“Ain’t nobody sat in that chair since Tennie died,” he said. “It was her chair. They all know it, an’ they don’t sit in it.”

Queen nodded, knowing that she did not have to move.

“Didn’t think I’d ever find anyone to take her place,” Alec said. “Didn’t think anyone would sit in that ol’ chair again.”

Queen nodded again. It was a good chair, a comfortable chair. It was home.

“How’s the saving goin’?” Alec asked her softly, and Queen shook her head.

“Not so good,” she said. “Not real good at all.”

It wasn’t true. She was saving well, but even if she saved all the fortune that her grandfather had once made, she would never have enough money to leave here.

Alec stretched out his hand to her. She reached to him and put her hand in his, and he grasped it hard.

“That’s all right, then,” he whispered, and his voice was gruff with affection.

They were married in the local church, and it seemed to them that all of Savannah came to their wedding. Minnie and Julie were bridesmaids, George

was best man, and Dora looked after Freeland and Abner.

Queen looked wonderful in white, and Mr. Cherry gave her away, because she had no pappy to do this for her.

When the service was done, Alec kissed her, and then Dora and George brought a broom, and placed it in front of them. Alec and Queen joined hands and jumped over the broom into the land of matrimony, as thousands of their forebears, slaves, had done.

They were free, and were proud of their freedom, and cherished it, but not ashamed of their days of slavery, for it was not of their choosing and they had survived. Free, they jumped over the broom in remembrance of all those who had not survived, and in remembrance of the small traditions that had helped so many endure the long years of their bondage.

Free, they jumped over the broom, and were married, and turned back to the cheers of the applauding congregation. And when Queen smiled at Alec, it was with a smile that might break your heart.

88

Her father was dead, killed in an accident to his carriage caused by a runaway wagon.

Mr. Cherry himself told her the news, in the quiet of his study. He had read it in the newspaper.

Queen was surprised that she was not more distressed. She nodded her head, thanked Mr. Cherry, left the house, and walked down by the river, trying to remember Jass, who had once been the most important person in her life. She had thought about him occasionally in the years of her marriage to Alec, but only occasionally, and then as some fond memory of some other life that did not matter to her now. Her new family occupied the totality of her heart, and Alec had become husband, father, and lover all rolled into one. She had given him two children, Annie and Conway, fine healthy babies who were growing into

fine small people whom she loved as much as any of the others, certainly not less than Abner and perhaps only a little more than those who were not of her own body. Abner was still her darling, for he was her firstborn son, and had shared a suffering with her that the others had not known, but how do you divide and quantify love?

She felt some need to come to terms with at least some of her past. There was an epidemic of yellow fever, the black wind as it was called, in Alabama and some of the other Southern states, but against Alec's strong advice, and she seldom went against him, she decided to go to Jass's funeral, and to take Abner with her. It was proper that he be present at the burial of his grandfather.

They took a coach to Florence, riding on the outside because they were nigra, and Abner thrilled to the journey, for he had no memory of anything outside Savannah. They booked into a cheap lodginghouse, and the following day

Queen dressed in black, and hired a cart and driver to take her to The Forks.

As they rumbled down the old familiar road that was not familiar to her anymore, Queen looked desperately for things she might recognize, but found nothing, not even a few distant memories. She tried to recall where Andy had picked her up in the butcher's cart, but could not. Every bend in the road looked the same as any other. The driver of the cart, Jonson, an old black man who had been a slave, talked of The Forks of Cypress and how famous it once had been, and how sad it was that Massa Jackson was dead.

She learned that Jass had never regained anything of his former fortune, but had enjoyed a settled life as state senator. She learned that he was no great friend to black people, and had voted, in the state legislature, against several measures that might have improved their lot. Of the surviving family she learned very

little, other than that Miss Lizzie had died some years ago, perhaps about the time that Queen had arrived in Savannah.

Then suddenly they broke through the trees, and the mansion stood before them on the little hill. Queen gasped at the flood of memories that surged through her, but she felt no pain, and began telling Abner of the days of her youth. This was why she had come, for it was important that he know something of his past. Abner, who was ten, listened attentively to his mammy, but found it difficult to imagine why this house, splendid as it was, so occupied his mother's mind.

She did not want to be too early for the funeral, so she told Jonson to drive on past the house, farther down the road. When they came to the old Henderson store, it was locked and abandoned, the windows boarded up.

Jonson did not know what had happened to the people who had owned it.

They rode back to The Forks and Jonson let them off at the main gate, and said he would come back for them that afternoon. Queen took Abner's hand and walked with him up the drive. The racecourse was long gone, overgrown with weeds, and only a few fences left to suggest what it had once been.

Queen could hardly remember what it looked like.

"And over here," she said, pointing to the other side of the drive, "were cotton fields, as far as the eye could see."

Abner tried to imagine cotton fields to the horizon, but all

he saw was untended grass on a few acres, and edged by encroaching trees.

They approached the mansion. The lawn was pretty and well kept, and the magnolia tree was enormous now, and filled with huge, creamy blossoms. But the house was not quite as large as she remembered, not quite as magnificent, and the twenty-one lovely columns were sorely in need of a coat of paint.

They didn’t go inside, for they had not been invited, but made their way to the back of the house, and down the track through the empty, derelict slave quarters, most of which had been pulled down. Through the trees Queen could see that the weaving house was still there, but she avoided it.

She was filled with a sense of nature reclaiming its own, for the path to the graveyard was overgrown, and the trees lining it were crowding in, as if they were walking through a forest.

“Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down like a flower. He fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. “

The preacher stood at the grave, surrounded by many mourners, for Jass had been an important man. All were white. Queen stayed back, at the edge of the graveyard, holding Abner’s hand. She looked for faces she might recognize, but saw none, except a frail old lady with white hair, wearing thick pebble glasses, who was supported by a younger man she did not know. William, perhaps? James?

“In the midst of life, we are in death. Of whom shall we seek succor but of Thee, 0 Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased.”

Queen became aware that someone had noticed her, and smiled to herself, for the color of Abner’s skin was the confusion. All the mourners were white, as she looked to be, but the darker Abner told the truth.

“Yet, 0 Lord God most holy, 0 Lord most mighty, 0 holy and most merciful savior, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death.”

One of the mourners whispered to another, and pointed to Queen. The man who had been spoken to detached himself from the group, and walked quietly to Queen. He asked who

she was, and what she was doing there. Queen sensed his antagonism, and told